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MR. BROOM AND HIS BROTHER

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MR. BROOM AND HIS BROTHER

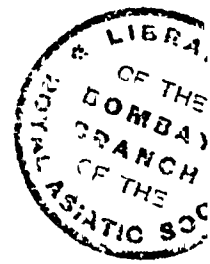
A STORY IN TWO PARTS

BY

MRS. ALFRED SIDGWICK

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PART I

PROLOGUE MR. BROOM

THE PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I

If your travels ever took you to the little duchy of Katavia, and you came through the forest to the castle of Avlona, you would say to yourself that the Duke of Katavia who owned it was one of the lucky people of the world. For Katavia has a magnificent sea-coast, and the castle, which is very old, faces the water. When, on a calm day, you are in a boat, and look up at it, the whole structure seems so much a part of the granite cliff that you can hardly make out, except by its windows, where the hand of the builder begins and ends. If you come on the castle unexpectedly, when the windows are lit up and the moon is shining on its ancient turrets, you think that the romance and splendour of such a home must express themselves in the lives of the people who own it, and can look out from those magic casements at the perilous seas below.

But it is impossible to imagine any one less romantic than the reigning Duke, Boris, who was now in his seventieth year, and had ruled in Katavia since he was twenty-five. The splendour of his position was not of his making. His family had been on the throne for three hundred years, and had weathered many storms and dire vicissitudes. The men had been brave and the women virtuous. They had married into other reigning houses, and the present Duke had cousins on every throne in Europe. But though

the family history was creditable, it was not glorious. The Dukes of Katavia were solid, sensible men who kept their inheritance but did not increase it, and who liked best to live at home, spending quiet winters in their capital of Rudno and sleepy summers in the castle of Avlona.

In the banqueting-hall of the castle were portraits of Boris' ancestors, and many of them had the bucolic expression, red fat face, small eyes, and obese figure that may go with some weight of character and judgment, but are an obstruction to romance. Unfortunately a man may have an exterior of this kind and yet fall violently in love: a lot that had actually befallen the present Duke in his youth. He had adored a princess of Gothland, and she had laughed at him because he was fat, red, and stupid. A princess is not usually allowed much choice, but in this case the beautiful Flosshilda had two strings to her bow. She married the Grand Duke of Züringen, a German, and therefore an hereditary foe, and Katavia had had a bachelor on the throne for fifty years: a determined bachelor. He said he would have married Flosshilda if she would have had him, but he had never seen another woman who could make the drawbacks to matrimony worth while.

The succession was assured. Prince Severus, the Duke's only brother, had married an Englishwoman in early youth, had died in middle age, and had left two sons behind him. If his widow had died too, all might have been well with the young princes of Katavia. Boris would have brought them up according to his own ideas, which were simple. As it was, the boys were bred by their mother rather than by their uncle, though he was their guardian and did what he could to drive them along the way they should go. But, naturally, a very clever quiet woman has more power over her sons than an elderly red-faced uncle, who eats too much at every meal and thinks that the

strength of an argument depends on the powers of the voice. Even when the Duke had right on his side he did not know how to make it manifest, and in practical matters he was often right when the clever, well-read Princess Severus was wrong.

"I want my nephews to be men and not professors," he would bellow. He never seemed to remember that if the young princes were his nephews, they were also Princess Severus' sons.

"Can they not be both, dear Boris?" the Princess would ask demurely.

"I mean they've got to be princes: and Sergius will sit on the throne some day when I am gone."

"May that day be far from us," the Princess would murmur. "Perhaps by that time there will be no earthly thrones, and then, if the boys are well equipped——"

She never reached the end of a sentence like that, because the old Duke would get red in the face and begin to gobble his words and march up and down in a fury of denunciation and denial. His sister-in-law was a Socialist, he said, and what business has a Socialist in a royal family? She would not prophesy these infamous things if she did not hope for them, and he wished he could divert the succession from boys who were imbibing such ideas.

"You may still marry, dear Boris," the Princess used to reply. "If there was a direct heir, my sons would have to fend for themselves. For what is it in these days to be a Prince of Katavia? A phantom of splendour with neither money nor power behind it! The time of empty titles has gone by."

These sentiments were so hateful and so upsetting to poor Boris that he could only glare and gobble when he listened to them. It was what came of his brother marrying an Englishwoman, he said to himself—an Englishwoman of the bluest blood, but absurdly poor, and more inclined to have ideas of her

own than any woman should be. If only Severus had not died and left his sons to be shaped and spoiled by her! She died, too, in course of time; but then the mischief was done. You might look up at the windows of Avlona and think that life must run gaily and gloriously behind them: but there was often a perplexed disappointed old man staring through them at the sea. Boris did not know what would happen when he left this world and a doctor of medicine reigned in Katavia. In his opinion it would be an outrage on every tradition he held dear. For the Hereditary Prince Sergius had qualified some time ago, and was actually practising as a specialist in digestive troubles in the University town of Zlot. Can you imagine a career less becoming to the heir of a throne? The old Duke could not. If his elder nephew had taken to the mountains and become a brigand, he might have forgiven him more easily. But a practising doctor! and one who specialized in digestive troubles! True, he offered to renounce the succession in favour of his brother Torquil, and the Duke had a soft corner in his heart for Torquil: but, just now, even that corner was so petrified by anger that it seemed as if nothing could ever make it soft again.

"There is no moderation in those boys," he said to his Chancellor, Prince Lussin. "One is a pedant, and the other is a wastrel."

The Chancellor was pompous but just: and he adored Prince Torquil.

"When a young man has small means, and large expenses, he gets into debt," he said with the air of a sage.

"I would pay his debts and treble his allowance, if he was reasonable."

"Reason in the young is rare," said the Chancellor.

"Then they should be advised by the old," said the Duke.

"The Princess Thelma has not inherited her mother's beauty."

"But she has inherited her mother's money."

"Has your Highness talked seriously to the Prince about his marriage?"

"No; but I've sent for him. He is probably here now."

At this hint the Chancellor rose, for the business about which he had come was finished, and he was only waiting for his royal master's permission to depart. As he bent over the Duke's hand, an equerry came into the room and announced that His Highness Prince Torquil had arrived at the castle.

CHAPTER II

PRINCE TORQUIL of Katavia had not inherited his looks from his father and uncle, nor, indeed, from any of their line. He was a Plantagenet, his mother used to say proudly : for she had the blood of that royal house in her veins. He was tall, big of bone, and clean-shaven. His hair was dark, his eyes were dark too, and changed with the light and with his mood, call them grey or steely blue, as you will. He wore this afternoon the full dress uniform of the Katavian Hussars, because in obedience to the Duke's summons he had come straight from a gala-luncheon in honour of his colonel's birthday. It was a white uniform, laced heavily with gold : the short pelisse flung over his left shoulder was lined with leopard skin. His gloved hand was on the hilt of his trailing sabre, and under his arm he carried the busby that his regiment decorates with a golden flap and eagle feathers. He bent respectfully over the ducal hand and asked courteously after the ducal health : after which he was invited to sit down.

" I am getting old," said Boris. " I cannot expect to be well. Besides everything goes wrong."

The Prince deposited his busby on a table close to him and prepared for an harangue. He had met the Chancellor on his way to his uncle's presence, and had some idea of what was coming.

" I cannot do with a specialist in digestive troubles as Duke of Katavia," said Boris, heatedly. " I'm told he takes fees from his patients."

" I believe he takes quite high ones," said Torquil. " People like being doctored by an Hereditary Prince."

"He must renounce the succession."

"He did say he would, but lately he has been so busy."

That was enough to set the Duke off for ten minutes. Just their mother's tone both young men took about the importance and the duties of the throne of Katavia. Sergius pushing aside a decision that crowned or uncrowned him, while he made Pills for the People! and Torquil equally indifferent and even more troublesome—oh, far more troublesome!

"I'm not indifferent," said Torquil. "I admit I'm troublesome. At least, I'm troubled."

He sighed and fixed his eyes on his busby.

"You've been getting into debt again," said the Duke.

"People are so obliging. They persuade you to have things, and when you've forgotten all about them they send bills."

"How much do you owe?"

"I've no idea."

"Then you ought to have. How much for gambling debts?"

"I don't gamble. I set my face against it. Ask any one in Rudno."

"Where does the money go then?"

With some justice the Prince might have said that money went in maintaining a position that was beyond his means: and that the Duke wished it maintained. Sergius was at his medical work; Boris was old and liked his ease. It fell to Prince Torquil to perform duties of hospitality and public appearance that were expected of the ducal family by a loyal people.

"I laid a foundation stone yesterday," he said; "and last week I entertained John of Gothland for several days. It runs into money."

"You must get money. Lussin says some of your creditors are pressing you."

"I wonder how he knows."

"I've no money to spare."

The Prince looked sad, but acquiesced. He knew his uncle was not a rich man.

"And I will not have a scandal."

"I should hate a scandal," said Torquil.

"A prince, especially if he is to reign some day, must sacrifice his wishes to the duties of his exalted position."

"Some of them," agreed Torquil; but when Sergius went in for medicine——"

"I am not talking of Sergius."

"I beg your Highness's pardon. You were talking of princes in general. To make a personal application was doubtless——"

"You must marry," shouted the Duke; "you must marry a woman with money."

"I should like the money," said Torquil; "but in these days a husband has no rights—not even to his wife's money."

"There are your English ideas again," growled the Duke. "In Katavia we are still simple pious people, and the husband is the head of the wife as he ought to be."

"No doubt he ought to be," murmured Torquil, looking very handsome and very sad. The cause of his sadness had come by post that morning, and it was a peremptory demand from a Vienna money-lender for a thousand pounds, lent at exorbitant interest two years ago. In the currency of Katavia, the sum now due to the money-lender sounded terrific, and Torquil did not know how to raise the tenth of it.

"You will go to Bertholdsruhe next week, and make yourself agreeable to Princess Thelma," said the Duke. "At the end of your visit you will propose to her. When your betrothal is announced your creditors will keep quiet. If not, Lussin must settle with them."

"But whom am I that Princess Thelma——"

"You are the Hereditary Prince. Sergius must renounce the succession and stick to his pills."

"I suppose he will?"

"Of course he will. He must."

"I am not in any hurry to marry," said Torquil.

"You will go to Bertholdsruhe on Monday," said the Duke with ominous quietness. He was always quiet just before he broke into a towering rage.

"Do they expect me, sir?"

"Lussin will arrange that. He has paved the way. The Grand Duke consents, although the marriage is not brilliant. I suppose you know that Thelma has a large independent fortune. She might have married better."

"I sincerely hope that she will," said Torquil. "I'm sorry, Uncle Boris, but I can't do it."

The Duke began to drum on the table with his fingers, and when he did that every one who knew him looked out for squalls. His nature was despotic, his temper violent, his power in his own land nearly absolute. No one but Princess Severus had ever thwarted him, and she had done it so suavely and cleverly that he imagined she went her own way by his favour.

"A squint can't be helped," said Torquil pensively, "but it would not be agreeable to see one opposite you every day."

"Agreeable!" cried the Duke. "Do you think you were sent here to find life agreeable? A prince on the steps of a throne has much else to do. You have responsibilities, boy—responsibilities to your family and your country."

"The lady not only squints, but she is known to be very bad tempered and to have attacks of nerves. No one who is up in modern eugenics would think the marriage a desirable one, either for the family or for the country. Leave me out, sir, if you wish, but

have some regard for future generations. When you think of the persistent way in which blemishes of mind and body——"

The Prince stopped, because his uncle hammered on the table. You could no longer speak of the noise he made as drumming.

"You will go to Bertholdsruhe on Monday," Boris shouted; "you will betroth yourself to Princess Thelma. I have just said it to Lussin, and I repeat it to you. You are a wastrel. You are over head and ears in debt. I feel sure of it. To this your English mother has brought her sons: one is an apothecary and the other is a fool."

The Prince rose. He was white with anger, and his eyes were as hard as the set of his fine mouth, for he had adored his clever charming mother. Never had the old man seen the young man in such a blaze of wrath and rebellion. Boris knew that he had gone too far.

"You may go," he said. "I will send Lussin to you. Perhaps you will listen to his arguments more readily than mine."

"I will not see Lussin," said the Prince.

"What!"

"I will not go to Bertholdsruhe on Monday."

"You dispute my commands!"

"I will not marry Princess Thelma. I will not marry any German. I hate the race. I tell you again, as I have told you before, that they mean to compass our downfall if they can. I will fight them, but I will never marry with them."

"Well! Well!" said Boris, who had an uneasy suspicion that what Torquil said was true.

"I will not oust Sergius from his rights. Let him reign in Katavia, when the time comes. Better an apothecary than a fool."

"Come back," cried the Duke; but his nephew did not hear him. He had gone, and was striding through

the halls and corridors of the palace, pursued by inquisitive glances and obsequious salutes. That there had been a royal row again anyone who saw the Prince could guess; but it was not till next day that everyone in the inner circle at Court knew that it must have been a worse row than usual. For Prince Torquil vanished. He was traced as far as Rudno, but not farther. He drove out of the town in his car, taking some luggage with him. But where he went, and what he did with the car, the police of Katavia could not discover.

The Court Circular said the Prince was travelling incognito in Switzerland.

MR. BROOM

CHAPTER III

It was Lady Looper who had persuaded her husband to bring their secretary, Mr. Broom, to Italy with them, and she reminded Sir Joseph every day of her wisdom.

"I like him down to the ground," she said. "Besides his languages save us a courier. I do wonder where he picked them up."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I do; but he gets out of it. He has a high and mighty way with him at times."

"He has," said Sir Joseph.

"Does he ever talk to you about his own affairs?"

"No; why should he?"

"Oh, well, I like to know a little about the people I employ. If Mr. Broom was a woman, I should say that he had a past. He will talk of the time in London when he was a clerk in a brewery. But try to take him further back, and he shuts you up at once."

"Then why worry him? As long as he gives satisfaction he earns his money. He was not engaged to amuse you with his reminiscences."

"Dear Joseph!" murmured Lady Looper; and her husband knew that she thought he spoke as a fool. She often thought so, and usually let him know it by calling him "dear Joseph." They were on excellent terms with each other; but the lady was quick-witted, and the man was not. They had a good deal of money made by their fathers in trade. Sir Joseph was a solid,

rather stupid man, who dabbled in politics to please his wife, and had given large sums of money in the right directions, because she wanted a Baronetcy. It pleased her enormously to be called "my Lady" by servants, and to be announced as Lady Looper to her friends. She did not look the part as well as she could wish, but what Nature denied in one way her self-assurance and aplomb made good in another. She was short, she was stout, she had snub features, a yellow skin, and little twinkling brown eyes, set aslant like a Chinaman's. She was not at all refined, and her tongue could be vindictive. She had enemies, but she had friends too; and she never lost a friend. Mr. Broom called her "Miladi," and liked her. He had been engaged in a hurry, just before the Loopers came abroad, and his references had not been as full or as long as they ought to have been. They spoke well of him at the brewery, but he had only filled a gap there for six weeks, and before that he seemed to come out of nowhere. Lady Looper had not even been able to discover where the young man had been educated.

"Sometimes I think his English name must be assumed," she said. "I am sure he is not English."

The husband and wife were sitting in the pergola that adjoined their hotel, and commanded from its stone seats one of the most romantic views in Italy. Behind them rose the mountains of the Neapolitan Apennines. Below them the ancient roofs of a little fishing town struggled round the bay. In the harbour, boats rode lazily at anchor, and farther out to sea red sails hardly stirred in the light breeze. The sea was as blue as the clear sky, and wherever there was no shade the heat of the sun was more than English people bear with comfort. But the pergola was shady, and at this height the air was fresh. An interminable winding staircase, roughly hewn in the rock, led from the shore to the hotel, which not long ago

had been a monastery, where for many years an order of Capuchin monks had entertained travellers. Now, the monks had departed, and a Swiss hotel-keeper reigned in their stead; but the hotel bedrooms were still as narrow as cells and plainly furnished. The hotel meals were served in the ancient refectory. The Abbot's parlour was furnished like a drawing-room, and the chapel, though it was respected and preserved, was now rarely used for Divine Service.

As the Loopers sat together in the pergola, they watched a party of people come slowly up the steps towards the hotel; and they were so greatly interested in the new arrivals that Mr. Broom, bringing the day's post, was by their side before they noticed him. He was a tall, distinguished looking young man, with the carriage of a soldier, clean-shaven, and well dressed. He sat down beside Lady Looper, whilst she opened her letters, and fixed his attention on the party of new people just arriving. There were three women and one man, and Mr. Broom guessed that one of the women was an invalid and one a maid. The man had a squat figure and a sallow colour. He led his party, addressed the manager who received them, and entered the hotel first. The two ladies, walking together, followed him; and then came the maid.

"I wonder who they are?" said Lady Looper, looking up from her correspondence.

"I'll soon find out," said Sir Joseph, and went towards the hotel.

"You never seem to get letters or to write them," said Lady Looper to the secretary.

"Don't you envy me?" he answered.

"No, I don't," she said. "I look forward to my post every day. It keeps me in touch with my friends."

There was an opening for Mr. Broom. He might say something about his friends, and let the lady know who they were, and why none of them ever

wrote to him. But he did not follow her lead. He was staring dreamily across the bay, and when he spoke he asked her if she would require a carriage this afternoon. But she was not easily rebuffed. She said she would have a carriage after luncheon, and that she hoped he did not regret coming with them to Italy.

"I regret nothing," he said with a charming smile.

"You seem to be a lonely man," she went on.

"I am," he admitted.

"Have you no relations?"

"I have a great many."

"In good positions?"

"Some of them."

"Have you quarrelled with them?"

Mr. Broom looked at the lady. He liked her, but her curiosity became intolerable now and again. When it did, he felt obliged to check it, and to do so a look and a certain air of silence sufficed.

"Here comes Sir Joseph," he said, when he saw that Lady Looper would be glad to change the subject and resume friendly relations; and as he spoke Sir Joseph bustled up to them full of information and excitement.

"One of the ladies is Miss Dimsdale," he said; "Miss Dimsdale of Liston Park. She is travelling with her companion, her doctor, and her maid; they have engaged a whole row of rooms. Miss Dimsdale is very ill, I am sorry to hear. She will not appear downstairs unless she gets better. I had not heard of her being ill, had you?"

"When I last saw her, she was the picture of health," said Lady Looper.

"Miss Dimsdale is probably the richest woman in England," said Sir Joseph to Mr. Broom. "She has a magnificent place near us in the country. Her father has entertained royalty there. He died about a year ago, and left all his money and land to his only child."

"I wonder what is the matter with her," said Lady Looper. "I wish we knew her; but we don't. I've a good mind to call on her now that we are under the same roof. She might be pleased to see an English neighbour if she is ill."

"I see that a prince is practising as a doctor," said Sir Joseph, who had opened an English paper and was reading it with avidity. "My dear, I wish you wouldn't take this rag. It's downright scurrilous."

"Read the most scurrilous part and let us judge," commanded Lady Looper.

"'The Royal House of Katavia is in a fizzle,'" began Sir Joseph. "'As everyone knows, the present Duke is a fat, red-faced stupid old fool'—you look surprised, Mr. Broom! Don't you know our Society papers?"

"Not this kind," murmured Mr. Broom.

"'He has no children,'" continued Sir Joseph. "'The Hereditary Prince is his nephew and is practising as a doctor in Zlot, the one and only University town in the duchy. The other nephew, Prince Torquil, is well known to be his uncle's favourite and will succeed to the dukedom, if the old gentleman and his rascally Chancellor can set the pillman aside. But where is Prince Torquil? Several people want to know: his hot-headed old uncle, who quarrelled with him, a certain Viennese money-lender, and the Princess Thelma of Züringen, whose betrothal to the handsome young Prince was imminent! The Princess, says the little bird, is not handsome, and the same little bird whispers histories of a row between the Duke and the young Prince anent a marriage that presumably will not come off. At any rate the bridegroom is still missing. A mad world, my masters!'"

"Now I wonder whether there is a word of truth in the whole story?" said Lady Looper. "Probably Prince Torquil is sitting quietly at home."

CHAPTER IV

THE hotel had been scarcely altered since it was a monastery, and the bedrooms assigned to Miss Dimsdale and her companions were narrow, small, and barely furnished. The young lady sat at her open window and gazed at the sea, while her maid, Pogson, unpacked her mistress's trunks and grumbled at the accommodation.

"There is not even a wardrobe," she complained. "How can I hang up your things, ma'am, when there is no wardrobe?"

"You can't hang them up," said Miss Dimsdale. "Let them lie down in that chest of drawers."

Pogson sniffed, wished herself back in England, and wondered for the thousandth time why gentry who have luxurious homes should leave them for such holes and corners as these. They had actually not been able to drive to the doors of the hotel, but had been obliged to walk up to it by innumerable rough steps cut in the cliff. Now they were here, there was no wardrobe, and not what Pogson would call a dressing-table or even a proper carpet on the floor.

"Shall we be here long, ma'am?" she asked. "If not I'll leave most of your things in your trunks. I should judge that this is not a place where much dress will be required."

"What do you judge by, Pogson?" asked the young lady.

"By the look of the rooms, ma'am."

"They were monks' cells a little while ago."

"I think it is a pity the monks didn't stay in

them then. Trunks would probably not be wanted by those gentlemen, and where to find a place for our biggest I do not see—unless I take it in mine."

"Do as you like, Pogson," said the girl languidly, and she leaned back in her chair with her eyes shut. She had been ill in Naples and had not picked up her strength yet. She was not used to illness, and until her father died she had hardly known a sorrow. Her mother had died when she was a child, and all her life she had been petted and guarded by her father and by people he wisely chose to help him. She had grown into a healthy, cheerful, most captivating girl, with a twinkle in her candid grey eyes, and the spring of youth in her walk. Her figure was light and tall; she had abundant golden-brown hair, and, when she was well, a charming colour. All this sounds rather commonplace, and so it might have been if the lines of her neck and chin had not given her a distinction of beauty that was rare. Her little head was set on her shoulders with proud grace, and her delicate chin emphasized the breadth of her brow and the distance between her eyes. But just now her beauty was blurred by illness; her colour had lost its freshness, and her movements were so weak and heavy that, like the old woman in the nursery rhyme, she said to herself: "This is none of I." She was still resting in her chair, with her eyes half shut, when Pogson went out of the room and let in a fashionably dressed woman of about thirty, who had been at the door when Pogson opened it. This was Miss Carry Jonas, who had come to live with Miss Dimsdale a year ago as her companion and friend. Pogson detested her and always described her as "hidjeous." But she was not hideous. Some people admired her immensely, and it depended on your temperament whether she attracted or repelled you. She was like an Aubrey Beardesley woman, tall, sinuous, red-lipped, and narrow-eyed. She had

thin claw-like hands, and sometimes, when she looked at people, her eyes were nearly closed, as a cat's when it watches a mouse. There had been a day when Patricia Dimsdale thought her the most odd and fascinating person she had ever met; but that day had gone by. The girl looked uneasy and afraid this morning when her friend came in.

"You ought to be lying down, Patricia," said Miss Jonas. "Dr. Pratt considers rest so important for you. Have you taken your medicine?"

"No," said Patricia. "I hate that medicine. I believe it does me more harm than good."

The lady's eyes closed as she looked at the girl, and she seemed to consider before she answered.

"Have you told the doctor so?" she asked.

"Yes; but he pays no attention."

With the air of a strong person who is tried by the whims of a weak one, Miss Jonas went to the chest of drawers, found the medicine, and poured out a dose. She did not watch Patricia drink it, but turned back to the bed and got it ready. Then she left the room. Pogson came back, helped her mistress into a loose wrapper, and closed the sun shutters. Then she went into her own room and unpacked for herself. It was just lunch-time when one of the hotel servants dashed into her room, and, with every sign of alarm, pointed across the corridor to the one Patricia occupied. Pogson hurried in and found, as she expected, that the young lady was taken violently ill again. The poor girl was ashy white, sick and writhing with pain.

"Calls himself a doctor! Why don't he cure you?" muttered Pogson; but she did not run for the doctor. She went to the young lady's travelling bag and found a flask of brandy.

"I wish we were at home, I do," she went on in a growl. "You was never ill till we come to furrin parts. What can you expect?"

"I believe it's that new medicine," said Patricia. "Whenever I take it, I feel like this soon after."

She spoke without suspicion, but Pogson heard her with alert, surprised attention, and fetched the bottle from which Patricia had been given a dose.

"It smells strong of peppermint," she said after uncorking it. "There's no harm in peppermint. I takes it myself."

As she spoke, there was a knock at the door, and before she could put the bottle down Dr. Pratt came into the room. His glance went straight to the bed, but he spoke first to Pogson.

"What are you doing with that bottle?" he asked.

His voice was soft and his manner honeyed: yet at the sight of the bottle in Pogson's hands his brow had clouded and one corner of his upper lip had lifted with the effect of a snarl.

"I was smelling the peppermint," said Pogson; and with a flounce of aversion she obeyed his gesture of dismissal and left the room.

"If I had my way that woman should pack her trunks," he said, going nearer to the bed. Patricia did not speak. The doctor looked at her with anxious scrutiny, and took her wrist in his hands.

"The long drive in the sun has been too much for you. I feared it might be," he said. Then, suddenly, his eyes fell on the flask of brandy that Pogson had forgotten and left upon the bed.

"What is this?" he cried.

"Brandy," said Patricia. "Pogson was going to give me some."

"It is monstrous," he shouted; for his voice was sometimes as low as a whisper and sometimes a roar. The veins of his forehead were swollen with anger now, and when Miss Jonas came into the room he turned to her with the flask in his hands.

"If this goes on, I shall throw up the case," he said. "I shall return to England."

"What has happened?" asked Miss Jonas.

Neither of them tried to help the girl on the bed, although she was seized just then with a fresh bout of pain and nausea.

"That woman has secreted brandy, and was going to give it against my orders," said the doctor. "Come away, Carry. If Miss Dimsdale trusts her maid's knowledge more than she trusts mine——"

"I don't! I don't!" moaned the girl. "But I can't bear this pain. It is killing me."

Miss Jonas went up to the bed and straightened the coverlet, disarranged by the girl's uneasy movements.

"You'll be better presently," she said. "You've had these attacks before, and they pass."

"Each one is worse than the last," said Patricia. "I get no better."

The two people watching her did not speak and did not look at each other. For a time the girl lay still, but she breathed heavily and had a livid colour most distressing to see. Then the pain and sickness returned.

"When I left England I was well," she said in a panting whisper, as soon as she could speak at all. "What is the matter with me, Dr. Pratt? You must know."

"Yes, I know. You thought you were well, when you left England, but this illness was in you. I saw the signs of it."

"But what is it?"

"I will tell you when you are well again."

"Shall I ever be well again?"

"I am sure you will—if you will put yourself in our hands and not in Pogson's."

"I am in your hands," said Patricia; and that was all she could say for some hours to come.

CHAPTER V

SIR JOSEPH and Lady Looper were an attached couple and did not always want a third person with them. They liked to take short walks and drives by themselves nearly every afternoon. This left their secretary free, and he scrambled about the hills behind the hotel as if he had been born and bred in a hill country. He always went alone. The Loopers and Miss Dimsdale, with her party, were the only people staying for more than a night at the hotel, and their acquaintanceship with each other did not grow. This was not Lady Looper's fault. She would have bustled into a friendship with the heiress and her companions the day they came, if they had been willing. But Miss Dimsdale hardly appeared, and the doctor and Miss Jonas made themselves disagreeable. Lady Looper met with rebuffs.

The consequence was that Miss Dimsdale found herself isolated when she came downstairs. Her companions had established a frost that kept off the Loopers, and the secretary they treated as negligible.

"The poor girl is at death's door," Lady Looper had exclaimed when she first saw Patricia; but as time went on it seemed that the place suited her, for she looked better every day. She began to move less languidly, to eat with more appetite, and to recover her spirits.

"She ought to be plain," said Lady Looper. "It isn't fair that a girl with all that money should be a beauty too."

"She is charming," said Mr. Broom.

"I wonder whom she will marry," speculated the lady. "Short of royalty, she is a match for any one."

"Because of her money?"

"Yes."

"I do not like those people with her," said Mr. Broom, in his measured, slightly foreign English. "I do not like men with fat, smooth cheeks and lying eyes. He should not be my doctor."

"Miss Jonas has style," pronounced Lady Looper. "She wears her clothes well and always looks smart."

"Also, she looks evil," said Mr. Broom.

"Are people ever evil?" said Sir Joseph. "Every one I know is commonplace."

To some natures, the world is a mirror, reflected Mr. Broom, giving back nothing but what they can see and feel in themselves. Sir Joseph was an excellent man, but he was haunted by a fear of trying to see farther through a brick wall than his neighbours: and he need not have been. He would always see just what the man in the street did, and not an inch farther. Mr. Broom thought the two people guarding the heiress unpleasant, but not commonplace. The man had a jowl like Nero's and the woman was viperish.

One afternoon, towards the end of their stay, the secretary set out for a ramble through one of the most romantic and beautiful mountain gorges in Italy. A good driving road led along it; for at the top of the gorge, a three hours' steady climb from the sea, there was a big old church, and a village where, in past ages, smugglers and pirates used to shelter, and where, nowadays, pleasure pilgrims found a comfortable hotel. But the hotel in which the Loopers stayed and the one high up in the hills, were tiny oases of civilisation in a district sparsely inhabited. You might walk for miles and meet no

one: and the vegetation would be rich in colour and profuse in flowers, but, except for occasional olive woods, as wild as the colossal cliffs commanding the gorge. Here and there a cluster of rude huts still huddled near an ancient church or beneath the walls of a castle long ago in ruins; but who lived in the huts, and how they made their bread in this wild land, Mr. Broom did not know. Legends of wickedness, beyond anything imagined or allowed in these gentler days, attached themselves to the name of a Queen, who, so the story runs, used to bring her lovers to one of these castles, and when she wearied of them, cast them from the rocks into the depths below. Her exploits were in Mr. Broom's mind as he made his way along the gorge; for though he walked on a broad road, and on the opposite side from the Queen's castle, he walked on the edge of a precipice no mortal eye could plumb. The road was broad enough to let two carriages pass in safety, but Mr. Broom was not surprised that Lady Looper had come back yesterday saying she would never drive that way again.

About a mile from the hotel the road took a sudden turn and entered the wildest and most beautiful reach of the whole ravine. No human habitation had ever found a place there, and its desolate and awful crags were as sacred to the mountain birds that built amongst them and to the plants that grew amongst them, as they had been a thousand years ago. Below, a torrent rushed swiftly to the sea, but could only be heard as a murmur at this height above its waters, and except when carriages were passing, the silence was eerie and profound. Mr. Broom, with no thought in his mind but enjoyment, looked about him for a resting-place that would be more agreeable than the dusty road, and found it in the shade of olive trees a little way up the hill-side on his right. He sat down and lighted a cigarette.

When the cigarette was finished he still lingered; for the afternoon was hot and the shade seductive. At first, no one came in sight, and no sound disturbed his sense of solitude and peace. But just as he was making up his mind to go on, he saw two people coming his way, and soon recognised Miss Jonas and Dr. Pratt. He did not wish to walk with them or to go back just yet, so he remained hidden: but they were behaving in such an odd way that he watched them curiously. Their progress was slow, because on the short stretch of road he could see they stopped half a dozen times, and went so near the edge that he wondered for a moment whether they were contemplating a double suicide, and whether he ought not to warn them of his presence. But he did not think they were the kind of people to hurt themselves in any way or to despair of life, as long as they could cling to soft places: and he soon saw that they were extremely cautious. The doctor tapped every foot of earth with a heavy stick before he trusted it. Miss Jonas remained discreetly behind him. But what were they doing and what were they saying? Just opposite the place where Mr. Broom lay hidden, a point of the cliff jutted out slightly beyond the line of the road, and a splendid patch of cyclamen was in flower there. As they reached it, the two people stopped, and it was so still that, though they did not speak loudly, what they said could be heard. The doctor pointed to the treacherous corner where the cliff began to jut out, and he seemed also to point to the cyclamen.

"Here!" he said.

"But suppose a carriage comes by?" said Miss Jonas.

"We must look both ways, of course. It is an instant's work. We should be glad of a carriage after it was done."

Miss Jonas shuddered.

"Suppose we were seen?" she said.

"Look round now. Could you have a safer place?"

Miss Jonas looked above and below and around, as well as she could, but saw no one.

"It ought to be over long since," she said. "You promised me it would be quick and safe and easy. What has happened?"

"I know exactly what happens," said the doctor. "She throws it away."

"She says she takes it regularly."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders slightly and turned back to the road.

"I much prefer the other way," said Miss Jonas; and she might have been speaking of the road.

"Women always do," said the doctor.

"I'm afraid of this being bungled."

"You must trust to me."

"I shall hate seeing it too."

"I shall hate doing it," said the doctor, in his most sugary voice. Then they walked on up the hill, and were soon out of sight.

Mr. Broom watched them till they disappeared, and then, instead of continuing his walk, returned to the hotel. He hoped he was not a fool for his pains, but he felt uneasy.

CHAPTER VI

JUST behind the hotel there was an orange garden, and Mr. Broom took his way through it this afternoon. He came upon Miss Dimsdale sitting there with rugs and cushions arranged by Pogson, and Pogson herself a little way off reading a number of *Society Snippets*, lent her by Lady Looper's maid. As Mr. Broom went by, he lifted his hat to the young lady, and she smiled at him. They had hardly spoken to each other, but her smile encouraged him to linger a moment and make one of the inane remarks about the weather that are as much a formula for English people as the language of flowers is for some Southern races. Mr. Broom said it was a fine day, and meant that he would like to go on talking: and Patricia answered so kindly that, in a minute, the two young people understood each other sufficiently, and were sitting together beneath an orange tree on a fur rug. Pogson folded up her paper and moved quietly away.

"Have you been for a walk?" said Patricia.

"Yes," said Mr. Broom. "I've just been for a walk."

"I'm going for one to-morrow. Dr. Pratt thinks I could manage or mile or so now."

"Have you been ill long?"

"I was never ill in my life till I got to Naples a few months ago. I'm much better again now."

"You didn't come abroad for your health then?"

"No. Dr. Pratt says now that I was really ill when I left England, but I didn't know it."

"Does he tell you what is the matter?"

"No."

"You have great faith in him?"

Patricia hesitated a little, and Mr. Broom watching her saw that his question troubled and roused her; which was what he wished it to do.

"I have much more faith in him to-day than I had a week ago," she said.

"How is that?"

"I am getting better. The doctor himself seems surprised that I am so much better. He asked me to-day if I was taking my medicine regularly, and said it was doing even more for me than he had hoped."

"Do you take it regularly?"

"Yes. Let us talk of something interesting now."

"But I haven't finished. I'm rather interested in Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas. Have they been with you long?"

"Not very long. Miss Jonas came when my father died, about a year ago. Dr. Pratt is an old friend of hers and came to stay with us at Christmas. When I suggested a spring in Italy, she said she would feel happier if he came with me."

"Why?"

"I suppose, because it lessens her responsibility. She wants to get me back to England safe and sound."

"Would she gain by that?"

"No. On the contrary, she would gain if I should die. What odd questions you ask."

"You have left her money?"

"Yes. I have left her money."

Considering that they had never talked to each other before, the conversation was not only odd but quite incredibly intimate; and how Patricia could allow his questions and willingly answer them she did not understand. She could not justify it. He was a stranger and they had talked of her companions.

But he was a young man of exceptional attractiveness and of a surprising dignity and ease. She felt at home with him, ready to trust him, and ready to meet his advances with delight. Yes; that was the word. His interest and his eager friendliness delighted her. She had begun to think that she needed a friend—a stronger one than Pogson; and she felt that Mr. Broom's want of money and social power did not affect him at all. He had the bearing of a man used to authority and to the respect of others: a self-reliant quiet manner that she admired.

"Now, I'm going to ask you some questions," she said. "How long have you been travelling with the Loopers?"

"About six weeks."

"Is it your first secretaryship?"

"Yes. When they engaged me, I was a clerk in a brewery."

Their eyes met, hers sceptical and his defying her to doubt him.

"You were not brought up to be a clerk," she said.

"How do you know?"

"By the set of your shoulders. By everything."

"Oh! I've been drilled. I admit that."

"Yes; I see you've been drilled. I see other things, too. I saw you once just about to go out of a door before Sir Joseph, though he is old and you are young. You remembered in time and drew back. But you have the air of some one who is used to go out of doors while others draw back."

"'I was once a King in Babylon,'" quoted Mr. Broom, and then he changed the subject.

"We are going to Rome next week," he said. "The Loopers have invitations to the fancy dress ball at the Embassy. They are going as Falstaff and one of the Merry Wives of Windsor."

"I have an invitation too," said Patricia.

"Are you going to Rome?"

"I don't know. I said something about it to Dr. Pratt this morning and he seemed willing. I am certainly much better. We are going along the Vicera road to-morrow to gather cyclamen."

Mr. Broom looked up sharply, was about to speak, and after all said nothing.

"Well?" said Patricia.

"I wouldn't go, if I were you," he said then. "It's a hot, dusty road."

"We shall go when the afternoon gets cool."

"It's a dangerous road, too."

"How can a broad carriage road be dangerous?"

"I've been there. The cyclamen grows where it is dangerous."

As he spoke, Pogson reappeared, carrying a medicine glass on a little tray. She had evidently been crying and looked very much upset.

"What's the matter, Pogson?" asked Patricia, taking the medicine from the tray.

"The cat is dead," she said in a low wretched voice, and turning aside, she sobbed bitterly.

"It's the hotel cat," Patricia explained to Mr. Broom. "Pogson had made a pet of it, and the poor thing fell ill this morning suddenly. It must have picked up something poisonous."

"I never fed it at all," said Pogson, turning with a violence of protest that seemed unnecessary.

"No one will think you did," Patricia assured her.

As the three young people stood there together Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas, returning from their walk, passed through the orchard by another pathway.

"I must go in," said Patricia. "I'm not supposed to be out as late as this, to-day."

She nodded to Mr. Broom and went towards the hotel, leaving Pogson to follow her with the rug and cushions. But Pogson lingered, and Mr. Broom, seeing that she did so, purposely lingered too.

"I hates 'em both," said she suddenly. She did

not speak or dress as well as a smart maid is expected to, but she had raised herself to her present position by her skill and cleverness. Though she spoke queerly and dressed dowdily, she practised the arts of her trade with knowledge, and she was devoted to Patricia, who had seen the makings of a good maid in her, when Pogson was a scrubby little nurse-girl. She considered that she was doing uncommonly well in the world, and that she owed her success to her young lady.

"You hate them both," repeated Mr. Broom pensively.

"We will name no names," continued Pogson.

"There is no need. I understand."

"Some one ought to make short work of them. I would, if I could. Send 'em flyin'."

"If those are your sentiments, Pogson, I wonder they don't send you flying."

"They've tried it on. I had marchin' orders in Naples from him. 'Miss Jonas can do all that is wanted,' 'e says. 'Miss Dimsdale will never be well while she has you doin' things for 'er I don't wish done.' He actually planked down money for my journey, and thought I'd be simpleton enough to go. 'Get off quiet,' 'e says, 'and don't worry your lady. I'll tell her you've gone.' I larfed in his face."

"And spoke to your lady?"

"No, I didn't. She's in terror of them both, she is. I told 'im I wasn't goin'. They can't make me."

"But why is your lady afraid of them?"

"Why is a mouse afraid of a cat? The Almighty made 'em so, and we're made all sorts likewise. She wasn't afraid either in England. It's since she was so ill in Naples. She trusts 'im and she don't trust 'im, and she can't shake 'im off as quick as she should."

"You don't trust either of them?"

A look of mortal fear came into Pogson's light

little screwed-up eyes, and under the red marks left by tears and agitation Mr. Broom saw her colour change.

"I wish they was both like that pore cat, I do," she cried vindictively. "Excuse me talking to you, sir," she said with an odd, sudden return to her usual former manner. "I'm that worried, and when I see you 'ere talkin' to my lady——"

She stopped and looked at the Loopers, who were coming towards them through the trees.

"They seems good-'earted people," she said anxiously.

"They are," said Mr. Broom, and moved away to meet them. Pogson looked after him, as she picked up her rugs and pillows.

"'E might be anybody," she said to herself. "I seen a lot of the aristocracy since I been in service, and if it was my last word I'd say 'e might be anybody. Oh dear! My poor puss! I wish I knew what to do. P'raps she did pick up something."

CHAPTER VII

THE ascendancy of one nature over another is often inexplicable to those who look on. You see no reason why the enslaved one should not break his bonds and win his freedom. There probably is no reason that could be produced in a court of law, where the tangled web of life is reckoned more material than ever it can be in reality. Who can explain why Patricia allowed herself to be dominated by her companions, both of a coarser grain and both living on her money? The situation had arisen gradually out of one of those intimacies that begin in delight and end in sorrow. Carry Jonas had come to Patricia when she was first mourning for her father and in great affliction. She helped the girl over a difficult time and won her friendship. She was adroit, determined, subtle, and interesting to the eye; not exactly beautiful, but commanding your eye by her uncommon lines and by the bold perfection of her clothes. She made a vivid adventure in Patricia's sheltered life, and at a moment when her heart sorrowed and her youth looked round for all that life might bring. Friends soon tell each other their troubles, and she found that Carry's haunting fear was of a poverty-ridden old age.

"If I live, it must come," she said. "I can't save, because I support my mother out of what I earn."

"Darling!" Patricia had whispered tenderly, and next day she wrote to her lawyers, who had urged her to make a will.

"As long as I live, I'll take care of you," she said

to Miss Jonas, a week or two later. "And never worry about the future again. I've just signed my will and left you thirty thousand pounds."

"Darling!" said Miss Jonas, and wrote to Dr. Pratt that night. She had been engaged to him some time, but she only hinted at an attachment made hopeless by poverty, when she suggested that he should be asked to Liston Park for Christmas.

"Don't you want to go and see your mother?" Patricia had asked, but Carry intimated that, though she supported her mother, they were happier apart. Indeed, Patricia understood henceforward that the mother was a painful subject, better avoided. As she had died some years before, this was natural. To talk of her often or much would have brought on complications.

When Dr. Pratt arrived at Christmas, Patricia wondered what a remarkable woman like Carry saw in him. She did not notice his jowl, and thought him rather oily and commonplace. But when the spring in Italy was planned, and Carry proposed that he should accompany them, Patricia consented. The extra expense did not signify, and she had been used all her life to be accompanied and guarded. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to travel with her companion, her doctor, and her maid, as they meant to go to little places where there would be no doctors near. She found that some of her old friends did not like the scheme, because they did not like Miss Jonas; but they could not prevent it. Miss Jonas had come to her with good testimonials of a formal kind.

But this afternoon, as she walked back to the hotel through the orange garden, she was oppressed by the change in her own feelings. She scolded herself for her fickleness and tried to fix the moment when her growing dislike and distrust of her companions had begun. Even on the journey trifles had

vexed her. The doctor displayed a petty, tyrannical temper that spoilt the harmony of their progress, and he fell out with Pogson on more than one occasion. Then, in Naples, Patricia had been very ill, and found that no one but Pogson could assist and comfort her. The sound of the doctor's honeyed voice, the narrow glitter of Carry's eyes, got on her nerves. They both seemed to watch her without pity, and whenever she was in pain she wanted to hide from them. Now, for a fortnight, she had been regaining strength; but she was a long way from home with two people she could not dismiss at a moment's notice and who behaved more oddly and tiresomely every day. If they had been her keepers they could not have isolated her more effectually or given themselves greater airs of protection and authority. She hated the atmosphere of loneliness and separation from the other guests in the hotel. She made up her mind every night that next day she would make friends with the Loopers. It would be cheerful and wholesome to be with people whose voices were not smooth and whose eyes were not hard. But hitherto she had not succeeded, because she had never once been left alone: and her companions were at daggers drawn with the Loopers. Even the glances they exchanged were hostile.

However, this afternoon she went straight to her own room, and, when she had rested a little, did not stay upstairs till dinner, as usual, but went downstairs again to the drawing-room, where she found the Loopers and Mr. Broom. They looked up in surprise; for never before had she appeared alone.

"We have just ordered tea," said Lady Looper.

"I should like some, too," said Patricia, and sat down with them. She could see that they would be pleased if she did. A waiter who was in the room took her order and departed.

"You've escaped for once?" said Lady Looper.

"Yes," said Patricia, rather startled by the use of a phrase that seemed to confirm her own half-formed ideas. Strangers noticed, then, that she was being guarded and hedged in.

"You look much better than you did when you came," said Lady Looper.

"I am much better," said Patricia.

"Joy, and temperance, and repose,
Slam the door on the doctor's nose,"

quoted Sir Joseph.

Then the tea came, and they all gathered round a little table near a window facing the sea. It was a pleasant hour: but Mr. Broom noticed that Patricia did not feel quite at ease. When the door opened, she looked towards it with scared eyes, and he felt sure she was here unknown to her companions and that she dreaded their anger when she was discovered. Both young people were so much attracted by each other already, that this hour was one of flying golden moments to be treasured and spun out. But it came to a harsh, sudden end, when Miss Jonas and Dr. Pratt came into the room, looking angry and determined. They bore down on Patricia, and spoke to her as if she was a troublesome child who had escaped from the nursery.

"This is your hour of rest before dinner," said Miss Jonas.

"I was not tired," said the girl.

"Come, come!" said the doctor. "I am the best judge of what is good for you just now. At any rate you are in my care."

"I am really well enough now to take care of myself," said Patricia looking frightened, but strung to an effort, and taking courage from the presence and support of her new friends. "I have just said that I will dine downstairs to-night. I'm sick of having meals in my own rooms."

This was defiance, and neither the doctor nor Miss Jonas liked it. Their silence was grim, and the glances they exchanged with each other eloquent. Then the doctor shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"You are a difficult patient," he said, and opened the door for Miss Jonas. But before she went, she beckoned Patricia aside.

"Come and rest a little now at any rate," she said, and Patricia went out of the room with them. She had struck a blow for her independence and in more ways than one felt satisfied with the history of that afternoon.

"That little man is a rogue," said Lady Looper, as the door shut after the doctor. "I feel it in my bones."

"Do take care, my dear. He might hear you," said Sir Joseph.

"What then?" said Lady Looper.

"It would be unpleasant. Officially, they are both Miss Dimsdale's friends, and she is so charming."

"So charming!" echoed his wife. "So charming that to know her is to love her. Mr. Broom!"

"Miladi!"

"What do you think of Miss Dimsdale? Isn't she like a princess in a fairy tale? Don't you wish you were a prince and could carry her away?"

"Must he who carries her away be a prince then?"

"Very nearly that—to be her equal—in England."

"What nonsense you are talking, my dear," said Sir Joseph. "Any gentleman by birth and education is Miss Dimsdale's equal socially."

"Who is Miss Dimsdale?" asked Mr. Broom. "Where does her money come from?"

"From her American mother," said Sir Joseph. "Her father was a plain country squire: not very rich, and not at all important, till he went across the water and the richest girl in California fell in love with him."

Mr. Broom listened with the deepest interest, and seemed about to speak, when Lady Looper prevented him by speaking herself.

"You needn't tell us what you think of Miss Dimsdale," she said. "I can see for myself, and I'm sorry. I'm afraid you haven't a chance. But what do you think of Dr. Pratt?"

"I agree with your bones, Miladi," he said; and, as Sir Joseph looked puzzled, he added: "The man is a rogue."

"The woman is worse than the man," said Lady Looper. "I don't know, though. They are a pair."

CHAPTER VIII

"I'M going to do it," said Lady Looper. "If they don't like it, they can lump it."

Sir Joseph glanced at Mr. Broom and sighed. Both men were standing with Miladi near the office, from which a capable young Swiss managed the affairs of the hotel.

"I'm sure they will not wish to dine at the same table with us," protested Sir Joseph. "You know how rude they've been. They do not desire our acquaintance, either for themselves or Miss Dimsdale. I hate forcing myself on people."

"I don't mind a bit," said his wife cheerfully. "I want to spoil their game."

So she ordered a table to be laid in the refectory for six people, and she saw to it that flowers were arranged unsociably high in the centre. Then, for luck favoured her, she took Patricia in with her party, placed her on one side, between Sir Joseph and Mr. Broom, sat down herself at the head of the table, and left the two remaining side places for Miss Jonas and the doctor.

"Whose doing is this?" Dr. Pratt asked in a soft but audible voice when they came in.

"Mine!" said Lady Looper, and her malevolent little eyes twinkled with satisfaction. "We are celebrating Miss Dimsdale's recovery. I've ordered champagne. You believe in champagne, I know."

"I do not," said Dr. Pratt.

"But you drink it. I've watched you crack a bottle with Miss Jonas more than once since I've been here."

The doctor looked at Miss Jonas and shrugged his shoulders slightly. They sat down with disapproving faces and took no part in the gaiety shown by the others. Before long their sour silence made itself felt, and even Lady Looper found it more difficult than usual to babble nothings gladly. Mr. Broom did not help her, because he was making the most of his chance and talking with animation and a wooing air to Patricia. She had put on a white lace gown to-night, and wore a row of pearls round her warm, white neck. She had more colour than usual, and her eyes were radiant and absorbed as she listened to Mr. Broom. Anyone with half an eye could see what was happening to these two handsome young people, reflected Lady Looper: but luckily the flowers screened them from their opposite neighbours, and Sir Joseph never saw anything so trivial as a love affair. He ate his dinner with enjoyment and did not notice that, when he made a remark to Miss Jonas, she either answered him with derision or not at all. Other guests were dining in the room, but at other tables, some way from this one which commanded a fine view of the sea.

"If I could choose," said Patricia, looking on, "I would live for ever by the sea."

"If I could choose," said the secretary, "I would take you to a home I know of beside the sea."

"Where is it?" she asked, her eyes meeting his without reproof, although his glance had been as expressive as his voice.

"It is in the Duchy of Katavia," said Mr. Broom.

"Katavia! Do you know that little far-off country?"

"I know it well."

"Have you ever seen Avlona—the castle of Avlona?"

"It is the Duke's summer palace."

"I have a picture of it. I have often wished to see it."

"I wish you were there and I with you," said Mr. Broom.

He puzzled Patricia, although since she had left the schoolroom she had been used to wooers. Presumably he was penniless, but he was neither diffident nor unscrupulously grasping. She had seen poor men of both kinds, and dealt with them. Her money had helped her to some experience with adventurers in matrimony, though it had left her open to attack elsewhere. This man had a stateliness of bearing that pleased her, but she did not understand how he came by it. He had the quiet voice and the composure of those who know that their glances will be watched and their nod obeyed.

"I want so much to see Avlona," she said. "I made inquiries about it once, when I was near Katavia, but I found that the public was not admitted."

"It is the Duke's private home," said Mr. Broom. "He spends his summer there."

"The mother of the Hereditary Prince was an Englishwoman," said Lady Looper, joining in. "She was Lady Mary Plantagenet."

"Yes," said Mr. Broom.

"Can a prince marry anyone who is not royal?" said Patricia.

"It is made difficult for him, but it is sometimes done, when he renounces everything for the sake of his marriage," said Mr. Broom.

It seemed to Patricia that he was talking in allegory and telling her that she if would take him he would be her servant and her pilgrim, giving up all he had. But he had nothing, she understood.

"Lady Mary was royal on her mother's side," said Lady Looper. "Her father was Earl of Mans and he had the old Angevin blood in his veins."

"You seem to know a good deal about the Katavian family," said Mr. Broom.

"I didn't this morning: but I've been reading a whole column about it in an English paper. They haven't found the runaway Prince yet."

"Would he be any good, if he was found?" said Dr. Pratt with a sneer.

"I don't know. He is wanted, because his brother has renounced the succession and the reigning Duke is ill."

Mr. Broom listened so attentively that a tangerine orange he had begun to peel never got finished. He said nothing, but when Lady Looper rose and they all went into the drawing-room for coffee, he took up a number of *The Times* and began to search its pages.

"You won't find it in there," said Dr. Pratt, watching him. "*The Times* isn't the paper for scandalous backstairs gossip about royalties. You want *Society Snippets*."

But Mr. Broom had found what he looked for, read it, and now put the paper down again. The column of which Lady Looper had spoken was not there, but *The Times* had a short paragraph about Katavia, announcing the change in the succession and the illness of the present Duke.

"You say you know Katavia," continued the doctor with an offensive air of incredulity. He was visibly in a state when a man who is not a gentleman wants a quarrel, and picks it as he can. "Ever been there?"

"I have been there," said Mr. Broom, and his frigid air surprised the Loopers and Patricia. It was unpleasantly final, and would have dismissed any one less used to get his way by bluster than Dr. Pratt.

"What about this missing Prince, then?" he went on. "What's the scandal?"

Without answering, Mr. Broom intimated by a slight inclination of his head that the doctor could

find what he wanted in the number of *The Times*, now lying between them on the table.

"There's nothing there," said the doctor.

"You'll find it all in *Society Snippets*," said Lady Looper. "Prince Torquil would not marry to please his uncle, and there was a row about it."

"What were you doing in Katavia?" said the doctor to Mr. Broom. He seemed unwilling to leave the secretary alone, and his face grew dark with rage when his quarrelsome advances were contemptuously ignored.

"I was staying there," said Mr. Broom.

"Doing nothing! It's an easy profession. I suppose your face is your fortune."

Miss Jonas, who had been watching the doctor anxiously, and had not sat down, now interposed.

"Come for a little walk," she said. "It is such a lovely night. To-morrow the moon will be later."

"To-morrow!" said the doctor, and seemed to be thinking. "I look forward to to-morrow," he said, with a snarl that was directed like his glance at the secretary.

"So do I," said Sir Joseph. "I am sure it is going to be fine."

"We want it to be fine," said Miss Jonas. Then she went out of the room, and Lady Looper opened the window at which she was sitting as wide as she could.

"Why do you do that?" said Sir Joseph.

"To clear the air," said Lady Looper. "I don't know which of those two I trust least. Forgive me saying so, Miss Dimsdale."

"I haven't liked them myself, lately," said the girl. "But I have never known the doctor as truculent as he was to-night."

"Are you married to them?"

"I suppose I am till I get back."

"Why should you be? Travel with us instead."

"How I wish I could," exclaimed Patricia, her lovely face flushing with the mere thought of such relief and such happiness.

"They both looked murderous to-night," said Lady Looper, especially the woman. Her hands weren't still a moment, and half the time she didn't hear what was said. She was watching something, I know."

"My dear, how you do exaggerate," said Sir Joseph. "You'll frighten Miss Dimsdale."

"I don't mind that, if I can separate her from them," said his wife.

"Well said, Miladi," said Mr. Broom.

Patricia looked from one to the other, half stirred to fear, half comforted by their support.

"I'm glad you are here," she said.

CHAPTER IX

"You don't seem to work very hard," Patricia said to Mr. Broom next morning.

"I've never been worth my salt," he admitted.

The two young people were sitting together in a shady corner of the pergola, from which they could see the sun-baked roofs of the little town, the harbour, and the dancing turquoise sea. They had been here more than an hour. The Loopers had gone for a drive. The doctor and Miss Jonas stayed indoors, and for once made no attempt to watch Patricia or to control her movements. In fact, they behaved as if they wished to avoid her.

"The spell is broken," she said. "After to-day I shall be my own mistress again."

"Why only after to-day?" asked Mr. Broom.

"I've promised to go that walk this afternoon, and I don't feel a bit inclined for it."

"Then why not say so and stay at home? I wish you would."

"I know you do. You said so yesterday. But I hate to seem changeable and capricious because, you see—I am."

"Are you?"

"Yes," said Patricia with genuine trouble in her eyes, "I must be. When I left England I still liked Miss Jonas, and thought her original and interesting, and I did not mind Dr. Pratt."

"But now you wish to be rid of them both."

"I feel differently about them," said the girl, seeming glad to talk of what filled her mind. "It sounds absurd, I know, but I feel afraid. They have

changed. They are hostile and furtive. They are allied against me and are stronger than I am, though since yesterday they have left me alone. I try to believe that I struck a blow for freedom and gained it, but I can't believe in such an easy victory. I'm my own mistress this morning! What shall I be to-morrow?"

Mr. Broom did not speak. What would she be, if he had seen aright, if he had heard aright on the Vicera road! But the suspicion was monstrous. He tried not to harbour it: on no account would he infect Patricia with it. When the time came, he would be on guard.

"A doctor has so much power, when once you are in his hands," Patricia went on. "Dr. Pratt has been right so often. Whenever he said I was going to be ill in Naples, I was ill. I began by laughing at him, but I soon knew better. Here I have got better in spite of his prophecies, and I can see that he is baffled and annoyed. I don't like doctors as a rule, do you?"

"Yes," said Mr. Broom. "I know one I like very much."

"Who is he?"

"He is the Hereditary Prince of Katavia," said Mr. Broom after a moment's hesitation, "Prince Sergius."

"Oh, do you know him?" exclaimed Patricia, showing some surprise.

"A cat sometimes knows a king," he reminded her.

"He is not the Hereditary Prince now," said Patricia. "Don't you remember? He has resigned in favour of Prince Torquil. Do you know him too?"

"Yes; I know him."

"What is he like?"

"Oh—ordinary!"

"What a pity. A prince ought to be extraordinary."

The young people were saying a great deal to each other that they did not put into words: and just now Patricia's slow appraising glance told Mr. Broom that, if he had been in Prince Torquil's shoes, he would have filled them, as they should be filled, handsomely and with distinction.

"Some day I mean to go to Katavia," said Patricia.

"When you go, I will be there," he said.

"When were you last there?"

"About three months ago."

"Is it true that Prince Torquil disappeared in order to avoid a marriage?"

"Quite true."

"Why couldn't he refuse it, and stay where he was?"

"I suppose he chose the easier way."

"But what can a prince do? Had he money?"

"Not much, I believe."

"Have you any idea where he is?"

"I have often ideas. I thought last week that he might have gone to the Baltic and been arrested as a spy. A year in a fortress would have given him breathing time. When Princess Thelma gets betrothed to some one else, he can go back."

"Princess Thelma is betrothed," said Patricia, and then felt mystified. She had undoubtedly startled Mr. Broom, and if she could read the signs of pleasure in his face she had pleased him.

"What makes you say so?" he asked eagerly.

"I learned it this morning in a letter. A friend of mine is in waiting on Princess Max of Gastein, and Prince Karl of Gastein is betrothed to Princess Thelma of Züringen. It is not in the papers yet, but it will be in a day or two."

"The Gasteins have money, but they are not a reigning house," said Mr. Broom.

"Do you know them?" cried Patricia, with her little air of surprise.

"Yes."

"I suppose Prince Torquil will go back now."

"No doubt he ought to, as the Duke is ill and his brother has renounced the succession. I wonder if the Duke is seriously ill."

"Did you know the Duke too? You look quite solemn and concerned."

"I am thinking of Torquil. If his uncle is ill, he ought to go back at once."

"Will they make it very disagreeable for him?"

"The Duke might, if he is well enough."

He waited a moment, and then he said—

"We are going to Rome next week."

"I know," said Patricia. "I want to go too. I told Dr. Pratt so again this morning."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing much. He was in a queer mood this morning."

"I wish you would take Pogson with you this afternoon. She is devoted to you."

"How do you know?"

"She talked to me yesterday after you went in."

"What an extraordinary thing for her to do!"

"She was upset, I suppose, about the cat, and she dislikes your companions."

"She takes them too seriously. After all, what can they do?"

"I think they could do a good deal in some directions. I wish you were out of their clutches."

"We have only known each other since yesterday," said Patricia in a tone of gentle reminiscence. "I have known Carry for a year."

Mr. Broom made no reply, and after a prolonged silence Patricia feared she had offended him. But when she turned her head to speak again, she saw that while she had been staring in front of her at the sea, he too had let his thoughts wander and his eyes grow absent and dreamy.

"Why don't you come with us this afternoon?" she said, and her question roused him.

"I was going to propose it," he said; "but I have changed my mind."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot accept Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas as companions even for an afternoon."

"You are very plain-spoken," said Patricia; and she rose from her seat, a little ruffled, a little on her dignity. He rose too, a man of stately height and just now of a determined and impressive bearing.

"I am sorry if I have vexed you," he said, very courteously; but she felt that he did not recede an inch.

"I asked you to come as my companion," she said.

"Will you leave them behind? Will you let me take you to see the cyclamen?"

He spoke eagerly, and waited eagerly for her answer; but when it came it chilled him.

"I don't think I can do that," she said.

He did not say another word, and he stood back politely while she passed by him on her way to the hotel. Yet she felt that it was he who had ended the interview, and that she had disappointed him.

CHAPTER X

THE luncheon table was laid for six people, and to-day Miss Jonas and Dr. Pratt took their places at it without demur. They were in an absorbed, uneasy mood, however. The doctor's voice was so smooth and soft that sometimes Lady Looper could hardly hear what he said, while Miss Jonas ate little and hardly spoke at all. The two young people did not talk much either, because they were at the point where spectators were felt as a check. So it would have been a silent party if Lady Looper had not entertained it, with descriptions of their morning's drive to the wicked Queen's castle, and the rocks from which she had sent her lovers to their death when she was tired of them.

"Life was worth living in those days," said Lady Looper, "now we are all so dull and respectable."

"Are we?" questioned Mr. Broom.

"I hate to hear of horrors," said Patricia, with a little shiver of aversion. "They happened to people like you and me, Lady Looper—alive and afraid."

"They probably felt nothing at all," said Dr. Pratt. "The rapid descent would make them unconscious."

"I don't know about that," said Lady Looper. "I once knew a man who had a fall, alpine-climbing, and he told me all about it."

"Perhaps it wasn't bad enough to be comfortable," said Mr. Broom.

"Perhaps you doubt my knowledge!" cried the doctor, his face rapidly getting suffused with rage.

The mere sound of Mr. Broom's low, leisurely voice seemed to exasperate him.

"I doubt all doctors," said Lady Looper, turning her starers on him after she had almost winked at her secretary. "I have several in the family."

"I have one in the family," said Mr. Broom.

"Where is he practising?" asked Dr. Pratt; and though the question was inoffensive his manner was not. The secretary met his glance squarely, and after a moment's pause that attracted attention, said—

"I can't tell you."

"I have a medical directory with me."

"You won't find him in it," said Mr. Broom.

The doctor looked at Miss Jonas, and without speaking they both expressed their opinion of a medical man called Broom who was not in the official directory.

"I suppose you are English?" said Dr. Pratt.

Mr. Broom's slight courteous inclination of the head did not answer in the affirmative, but said quite plainly that Dr. Pratt might suppose anything he pleased.

"Come and have coffee in the pergola," said Lady Looper, who saw that the doctor was getting red in the face again. She tucked her hands through Patricia's arm, but when they got to the pergola they found that only Sir Joseph and Mr. Broom had followed them.

"What a relief!" she said, plain-spokenly. "That dreadful little man is never happy unless he is quarrelling with some one. He has his knife into Mr. Broom."

"My dear!" said Sir Joseph in remonstrance. "Dr. Pratt is travelling with Miss Dimsdale."

His wife sat down beside him, and explained that she knew that as well as he did, and knew other things he did not dream of yet. "Look at them,"

she said and waved a hand benevolently at the two young people who had wandered to the farther end of the pergola together, and, oblivious of their elders and of coffee, were standing where the vine leaves framed them and the sea could be seen beyond them.

"My dear!" said Sir Joseph again; and he was evidently perturbed.

"I adore youth and beauty," said Lady Looper.

Sir Joseph blinked at his coffee and said so did he; but that the magnitude of the young lady's fortune was such——

He did not finish because his wife laughed and was just going to call him "dear Joseph," when Pogson's appearance interrupted them. She brought a message from the doctor to say that, as Miss Dimsdale was going for a walk this afternoon, he hoped she would come in out of the sun and rest now.

"Don't take a walk," said Lady Looper, when Patricia came up to them. "Spend the afternoon with us." But Patricia said she meant to have her own way about the big plan of going to Rome; so she would give in to the doctor's little plans for this afternoon.

"My dear young man," Lady Looper said to the secretary, when the girl and her maid had disappeared; "my poor, dear, young man! Any one can diagnose your case. No doubt Dr. Pratt does, and that's what makes him so ratty."

"I have a heavy post this afternoon," said Sir Joseph, getting up.

"You'll never pull it off," continued Lady Looper. It's the desire of the moth for the star—Mr. Moth."

"If you are ready, Mr. Broom," suggested Sir Joseph.

For the first time since he had been in Sir Joseph's employ, the secretary looked as if the call to work troubled him. But he got up at once, and went back to the hotel. He sat down at a table covered with

letters and papers, and was looking out those that would be wanted first, when Lady Looper appeared.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"I want to go out this afternoon," he answered. "In fact—I must."

"They won't want you with them."

"I'm not going with them."

Lady Looper waited a little for him to say more, but he did not seem to think it necessary.

"I hate reserved people," she cried.

"Shall I tell Sir Joseph that I want to go out or will you make some excuse for me?" he asked.

"Is it really important?"

"It may be. It may not be."

The door opened and Sir Joseph came in with a bundle of letters and a busy air that his wife refused to notice.

"I'm coming back in an hour," she said. "I want a walk."

Sir Joseph said that he was too busy for a walk, but his wife only blew him a kiss, and said it was hot and they would not walk far. In less than an hour she came in again dressed in a cool thin silk and carrying her Baedeker. "None of your letters matter," she said; and carried him off, protesting with his lips but in reality delighted. She blew the secretary a kiss as she went out of the room, and her husband told her in the corridor that she was making too much of that young man.

Half an hour's hard walking took Mr. Broom to the point of the road where he meant to wait, and as no one was in sight he had time to examine the jutting edge where the cyclamen were spreading, far beyond the shrubs of rosemary and cystisus, under which some of them found a little shade and shelter. The most dangerous spot was the corner he had noticed before. Here the flowers grew in masses; their lovely veined leaves covering the ground close to the

perilous edge of the abyss, and some way below it. He gathered a bit of the broom that was his namesake flower, and put it in his button-hole, not for decoration but as an emblem associated in his mind with battle and challenge.

. Then he climbed the bank and lay down, well hidden by olive trees and the shrubby growths between him and the road. The air was still, and the heat of the day had filled it with sweet aromatic scents; bees were humming, and occasionally the whirr of a bird's wing broke the perfect calm of the empyrean. There was not a cloud in the matchless blue above him, as the young man watched and waited.

He had to wait long enough to feel his ardour ebb away and doubts assail him. Perhaps they would not come at all; perhaps, if they did come, they would gather a few flowers, and walk harmlessly home again, he following, unseen and ashamed of himself. Best so, of course; but if so what was he? A fool for his pains and an over-suspicious and officious fool. Still, no one need ever know. The alternative would have been to run a risk unbearable and unthinkable: to have a fear that froze him and take no steps to vanquish it. That was not the high tradition of the broom.

Here they were! First muffled, and then clearly, he heard approaching footsteps, but not voices. They approached in silence, and when they came close he saw that in their faces that made him glad he had come. For Patricia looked here and there for help, and he knew that something must have frightened her already: the sinister silence of her companions possibly, or the roughness with which they led her on. Their faces were set and wicked. Never before had he known what wickedness looked like, thought the young man watching. They did not look at each other or at the girl whose lagging

steps hardly kept pace with theirs, until the doctor took her by the arm and forced her along. As they came close, she spoke, and the young man, creeping as quietly as a cat towards them, could hear what she said.

"I am too tired to go a step farther," she complained. "I'm too tired to gather flowers."

"You are not here to gather flowers," said Dr. Pratt.

"What do you mean?" cried Patricia; and her voice betrayed an extremity of terror that made it hoarse and indistinct. They were close to the corner now, where the cliff jutted suddenly, and where the cyclamen covered the ground.

"Take care of yourself," said Miss Jonas to the doctor.

He did not answer; but seized Patricia's other arm, and began to push her backwards towards the edge of the cliff.

CHAPTER XI

MR. BROOM leaped from the bank to the road, and getting hold of the doctor by the shoulder, so startled him that he let Patricia go. She sank upon her knees where she stood, dizzy with weakness, paralysed with fear. Miss Jonas watched the two men, but did not speak. She was startled, too, and malignantly discomfited: her colour was livid, and when the doctor tried to brazen it out with laughter, she could not support him in his part.

"You blundered into us," he said, twisting himself out of Mr. Broom's clutch, which released directly Patricia was in safety. "Didn't you see that we were near the edge of the cliff?"

"I saw everything," said Mr. Broom.

"Then why did you jump out like that? We might both have been over."

"Not both. You were safe enough." He stood aloof from the doctor and addressed him with the aversion and distrust he felt. His manner, even more than his words, declared that he had witnessed an attempt at murder.

"You are pleased to make insinuations," cried the doctor, beginning to bluster.

"Not at all. I make a definite charge," said Mr. Broom. "If I had not been here——"

He stopped, because he saw Patricia's face; and it frightened him. Consciousness had hardly returned yet, and her eyes were fixed on him as if they expected him to support and console her. She still stayed on her knees; a dazed, shaken creature, rescued by a

miracle from the Valley of the Shadow, still too terrified to believe in her safety. Mr. Broom turned his back on the doctor and went up to her. He could not punish the evildoers, but he could take their prey from them, and that was a matter for congratulation and thanksgiving.

"Come," he said; and at the sound of his voice Patricia rose. She stumbled a little and he put out his hand to help her.

"Why don't you speak?" Dr. Pratt said fiercely to Miss Jonas. "You saw what happened. You saw that Miss Dimsdale was in danger and that I tried to push her into safety."

"When Patricia comes to her senses she will remember what happened," said Miss Jonas. "She is rather upset just now."

Her slit-like eyes watched the girl narrowly, but Patricia did not speak. She turned from them, her arm in Mr. Broom's, and, together they began to descend the hill. The two people left behind watched them with dark, brooding faces, and when they were out of sight turned to each other in fury and alarm.

"How did he know? How did he guess?" snarled the doctor.

"She must have told him. She knew we were coming this way."

"She ought not to have known. Did you tell her?"

"I didn't say we were going to leave her here."

"We are no further."

"No further! We are finished! She will never speak to us again."

"Oh, nonsense! We must stick to my story and puzzle her. She won't remember or feel certain. She was silly with fright."

Miss Jonas reminded him that Mr. Broom had not been silly with fright, and that if Patricia and he

chose to charge them with attempted murder they would be in an unpleasant position.

"Not a bit," bluffed the doctor. "When people bring a charge like that they have to prove it, and they hardly ever succeed. I'm not afraid of them, but I'd like to wring that fellow's neck."

Meanwhile, Mr. Broom walked slowly on with Patricia, her arm close to his heart, her face touching in its sorrowful stillness, her eyelashes wet with tears which she tried hard not to shed. He was very much in love with her, and so all her ways and every fleeting expression of her face seemed adorable and set apart. He was close to the fine daintiness of her raiment, the delicate lines of her neck and chin and the golden tendrils of her hair. She seemed more precious than before, because, by God's mercy, she was still alive.

"Don't cry," he said, "it is past."

"I shall dream," she cried with a shudder.

They were both deeply moved and overstrung more so than they themselves knew. They walked quickly and said very little; but their hearts went out to each other with exaltation, hers in gratitude, and his in tenderness.

"What am I to do?" she said.

"You must get rid of these people at once."

"That won't be easy out here."

"Why not? Tell them to go."

"But I must give a reason."

"After what has just happened? Isn't that reason enough?"

"But you heard what they said. It would be difficult to prove. It is even difficult to feel sure. I don't remember well. I was too frightened. I shall have to go back and try to remember: but I would rather not."

"There is no need," said he; "I was there and can bear witness. I saw."

"Why were you there?" she cried, stopping short and looking up at him. "How could you know?"

"I saw them yesterday when they did not see me," he told her: but he did not describe more fully what he had seen. The whole episode had been so horrible that the girl's nerves were still quivering and upset. He wanted to divert her ideas, and not to dwell on the murderous cruelty from which she had only just escaped. They had reached the orange garden now and were standing beneath a heavily laden tree. Through its branches they could see the azure sky, and deep below and beyond them the sea shimmered in warm sunset lights.

"I am glad I am alive," exclaimed Patricia. "How beautiful it is here."

"But I want you to come to Rome," said he. "I don't want to leave you here."

She looked at him, but her eyes fell before his, which said more than his lips did. They saw each other framed by the golden oranges and by the sea.

"We both need courage," he said.

"Do we?"

"Circumstances are against us."

"Are they?"

She smiled a little now, and looked up again, for she guessed at some scruple in his mind: the scruple of a poor man who sees impassable barriers between himself and a rich girl.

"I love you," he said; but he spoke with gravity as well as with passion, and as if love was not powerful enough to give them to each other. For a moment his avowal stilled her. She listened to it with downcast eyes, and her face was pale. But when she lifted her eyes he could not stand there woodenly a moment longer. Yet, though his arms were round her, she saw that his face was both sad and triumphant: and why it was sad she could not understand.

"No one can separate us," she whispered. "No one can dictate to me."

He smiled a little at her eager eyes looking up at his perplexed ones.

"You are fortunate," he said.

"But why do you look so troubled?"

"There are people who try to dictate to me."

"To you—a man?"

"It sounds absurd, I know."

"But what do they want you to do?"

"To marry some one of their choosing who has money."

"But if they care about money——"

"They do."

"I have more than most people."

"Have you?"

His eyes were tender and ironical as he stooped to kiss her. But she thought he did not seem greatly relieved or impressed.

"Didn't you know it?" she asked.

"Yes, I knew it," he answered.

She waited for him to say more, but he did not seem inclined to, just then.

"Do you mean that you will have to do as you are told?" she asked, after a long pensive silence.

"In what-way?"

"Marry the other girl with money."

"Oh, that's all right!" he said gaily. "She is marrying the other man."

CHAPTER XII

PATRICIA kept Pogson with her till the last moment before dinner, and only went downstairs when she heard the bell. She wanted to avoid Miss Jonas and Dr. Pratt. The thought of seeing them again gave her strange physical sensations of fear and aversion that she had never known before; and when, in spite of her delays, she found them, evidently waiting for her in the drawing-room, she stood in the doorway, the image of unwillingness and distress. But they, acting as usual in alliance, came forward to meet her with inquiries about her homeward walk and the degree of her tiredness. Their manner had two sides to it, one that tried to be easy and friendly, the other strained and hostile. Patricia shuddered at the meanings she had learned to see in Miss Jonas's narrow eyes. Their faces looked evil to-night; and the doctor's smooth voice had an angry under-note in it, while Carry Jonas seemed hardly human when she glided up to Patricia with the sinuous motion of an adder and said in an acid whisper—

"You look hollow-eyed and pale. I'm afraid these violent delights must end. The doctor says so."

Patricia moved towards the dining-room and did not speak. As she walked slowly on, Lady Looper overtook her and put her plump white hand within the girl's slim arm.

"My maid is the biggest owl in Europe," she began in her high cheerful voice; "always has the wrong clothes ready and the wrong hair. That's why I'm late. How are you, my dear? Enjoyed your walk?"

"No," said Patricia, turning gladly to the small, ungraceful woman at her side. There was safety in her neighbourhood and sanity in her atmosphere.

"I thought I saw you and Mr. Broom come back together?" she said, as she took her place at table. The two men of her party were already there, and the party of six sat as they had sat the night before.

"We did come back together," said Mr. Broom.

Lady Looper was sharp enough to feel that the air was electric. Patricia looked ill, her companions looked sullen, and Mr. Broom was in one of his high and mighty moods, not inclined to talk much, but watchful and preoccupied. Dinner was nearly over when Sir Joseph snapped the tension by innocently asking Miss Jonas which day her party was going to Rome.

"We are not going at all," she answered. "Dr. Pratt has changed his mind."

Patricia's glance sought Mr. Broom's as if to ask what he thought of this news. Was it good? Was it bad? She saw that he was listening and waiting gravely.

"We are going to Taormina," continued Miss Jonas.

Lady Looper was listening now, and entered into the conversation.

"I'm sure you'll like it," she said. "I suppose you'll go to Syracuse and Palermo too."

She chose a tangerine orange from a dish in front of her, and then she said—

"We'll take good care of Miss Dimsdale."

"Miss Dimsdale goes with us," put in the doctor. "She is in our charge. It is on her account I have decided not to go to Rome."

Patricia looked at Mr. Broom again; looked at him, because she loved him, for support and counsel. She could not feel afraid when he was there, and she would not let him see her courage fail her.

"I am going to Rome when Lady Looper does," she said, across the table. "I am not going to Taormina."

"I believe that you are in my care and under my orders," said Dr. Pratt.

"I am nothing of the kind," said Patricia indignantly. "Why should I be? I am perfectly well."

"I suppose that, when a patient disobeys your orders, you throw up the case," said Lady Looper.

"Only when I consider the patient entirely responsible," said the doctor in a slow weighty way.

Patricia's eyes were wide with amazement and wrath, but she did not break the silence that prevailed until it had become charged with the sinister meaning of Dr. Pratt's reply.

"I am either going to Rome with Lady Looper, or I am going straight back to England with Pogson," she said; and her friends at the table admired the dignity with which she spoke.

"Then we will go with you," said the doctor, after a moment's thought.

Again the silence was uncomfortable, and Lady Looper, who had only half understood what was going on, got up and ended it.

"Come and have coffee with us," she said to Patricia, and they went into the drawing-room together. Sir Joseph and Mr. Broom sat down with them, while Miss Jonas and the doctor after a whispered colloquy approached their table too.

"I haven't ordered coffee for you," said Lady Looper, and her tone was not conciliatory.

"I must protest," began the doctor. He tried to be impressive, but he was uneasy and out of temper. His upper lips went up at one corner of his mouth so as to show his mis-shapen teeth, and the veins of his forehead were dark and swollen. Miss Jonas had far more self-control than he, and she watched him

anxiously, as the partner watches another who is playing with more assurance than skill.

"I must protest," began the doctor again, and his voice became a bawl. He was standing close to the coffee-table now, and to emphasise what he said he struck it with his fist.

"You must behave," said Lady Looper; for though they were sitting by themselves, other people were in the room and the noise the doctor made attracted glances.

"Miss Dimsdale is my patient," he said in a lower tone.

"But she is her own mistress, I suppose," said Lady Looper.

"Legally perhaps. I am talking of her case from a medical point of view.

"But you are not in authority over me," said Patricia.

"I maintain that I am until you return to England."

"It is not a question of authority," put in Miss Jones suavely. "We feel our responsibility. We are not satisfied to hand Miss Dimsdale over to perfect strangers. Above all, we desire to guard her from the designs of matrimonial adventurers. An heiress is peculiarly open to attack; and some girls, as you know, Lady Looper, are more susceptible than others."

Lady Looper turned very red, and for a moment had nothing to reply. There was apparent truth in what Miss Jonas said. In fact, the truth was more solid than the aversion and distrust that undermined it. They were strangers to Miss Dimsdale. She was an heiress. These people were presumably responsible for her. And if a penniless young man wooing a wealthy girl is a matrimonial adventurer, the description fitted Mr. Broom like a glove. Lady Looper glanced at him, and wondered at his imperturbable calm. Patricia, however was not calm. She had turned crimson with anger and confusion.

"Adventurers are not all matrimonial," said Mr. Broom. "There are various kinds."

"We are addressing Lady Looper," said Dr. Pratt.

"If Miss Dimsdale wishes to go to Rome, I can see no reason against it," pronounced Sir Joseph. "Rome is not a dangerous place nowadays."

"Any place may be dangerous if you fall among thieves," said Mr. Broom.

CHAPTER XIII

THEY were in Rome, and all established in the same hotel. To this extent Patricia had had her way. The doctor had sulkily withdrawn his opposition and said that, if the town air did not suit her, they could remove to Frascati or Albano. He took it for granted that he was to remain with her, and to continue his ministrations, and so did Miss Jonas. They hovered near her with a persistence she could not overcome and a watchfulness she could not shake off. If she had been positive about that moment on the cliff, she would have got rid of them at any cost; but it had come when she was faint with exhaustion and it had been so sudden and terrifying that her memory of it was a blur. She thought he had pushed her back towards the edge, and he swore that she had staggered, and that he had seized her roughly in order to push her towards the jutting breadth where there was safety. Into the midst of it had leaped her lover, and then she remembered nothing until he helped her to her feet and led her home. She had not heard what the two men said to each other.

She considered herself betrothed to Mr. Broom, and she did not understand why he seemed anxious to tell no one yet. There would be questions asked by the men who guarded her property; but no one could prevent her marrying the man of her choice. She had told him so this morning, as they sat together in a quiet corner on the Pincian Hill, and he had smiled at her with the tender irony any allusion to her money seemed to call forth.

"I only speak of it, because I feel sure it is on your mind," she assured him.

"It is not much on my mind," said he.

"Then why do you hesitate? I want to tell the Loopers."

"When the time comes we will."

"But what will make it time? What do you think will happen?"

He answered evasively and changed the subject, much as he did when Lady Looper asked questions which he did not want to answer.

"I trust you from the bottom of my heart," cried Patricia.

"You may," he said.

"If you wanted me to come over the hills and far away, I would come at your bidding."

"I shall remind you of that when we can go."

"But you are as mysterious as Lohengrin. You don't tell me who you are or whence you come."

"I am Broom, and I come to you from London," he said.

"You are not English enough for Broom. What other names have you?"

"Five."

"Five other names! What are they?"

"Vladimir, Nicholas, Boris, Peter, Alexander."

"Not really and truly?"

"Really and truly. I have a sixth, but I will tell you that one when we go over the hills and far away—my beloved."

She could not ask him any more questions. She could not vex herself or him with doubts. She could not feel doubts of his integrity and faithful purpose. But she thought it would have been wiser to announce their engagement at once.

"It would stop things," she explained. "They would understand that it was useless to try to keep us apart."

"I wish you would send them about their business," said he.

"But I tried, and they refused to go," she answered. "They say that they feel responsible for my safety. The most I could do would be to return to England with Pogson—to run away from them some night with Pogson. That seems such an extreme measure."

"I don't want you to do that," he said; and then that day they talked no more of anything that troubled them.

Patricia went back to the hotel by herself and when she arrived, she found Miss Jonas and the doctor both waiting for her in the lounge, which was a large one and used a good deal as a sitting-room. People who took light refreshments in the middle of the morning took them here, and though it was nearly twelve o'clock several elderly ladies and gentlemen were enjoying the hot water, or the cold milk, or the bouillon they drank by doctors' orders or to please themselves. A tray with a jug of milk and a glass filled from it stood ready for Patricia when she appeared. She drank a glass every morning at eleven.

"You are nearly an hour late," said the doctor.

"I thought you had both gone to the Villa Borghese," said the girl. She was going to take up the glass of milk, but Miss Jonas drew the tray on which it stood away.

"Ought she to drink it as late in the morning as this?" she asked the doctor.

"Wait a few minutes till you are cooler," he said to Patricia. "You have been walking too fast."

Patricia had not walked fast, and as a matter of fact looked cool and charming in her thin, white summer gown; but she was not in any great hurry to drink, so she sat down. The doctor looked at Miss Jonas, and then strolled away, saying that he had some shopping to do.

"You surely didn't stay at home in order to see me drink a glass of milk," said Patricia.

"You go about by yourself too much to please us," said Miss Jonas sourly. "You are too young to make yourself so completely independent of the older people with you. We are both afraid you are getting into mischief."

Patricia said nothing. She was too angry, and too much tied by the silence imposed on her by Mr. Broom. But her face sufficiently showed that she was displeased.

"However," Miss Jonas continued, "I do not want to discuss your affairs just now."

"I certainly will not discuss them," said Patricia.

"I have something to tell you about my own. Dr. Pratt and I are going to be married."

Patricia looked up with surprise and congratulation.

"I'm very glad," she said. "I hope you will be happy."

"We shall be very poor," said Miss Jonas, and there was a chill, threatening note in her voice, out of tune with her news.

"Dr. Pratt is very clever," said Patricia. "He will get a practice."

"A practice costs money."

Suddenly Patricia knew what was meant, and felt uneasy. She could give money, of course; but she did not want to pay these people to take themselves off. Her common sense was outraged by the idea of it. She looked at Carry, who used to be her friend, and was shocked, as usual, by the tragic change in her own feelings. How had she ever seen those heavily lidded, narrow eyes without distrusting them? How had she ever borne to kiss that cruel mouth, or clasped those claw-like hands in amity? The mystery and the fascination had utterly vanished, leaving aversion behind.

"Do you remember telling me that you had left

me thirty thousand pounds? " said Miss Jonas, after a short, uncomfortable silence. As she spoke, she pushed the little tray towards Patricia, and the girl took the glass of milk into her hands.

" I remember very well," said Patricia.

" Give it to me while you are alive," said Miss Jonas, and, leaning forward, she put her own hand on the girl's so that she could not raise the glass to her lips. For a moment they faced each other so and without speaking. Patricia's whole being expressed amazement and refusal.

" Oh, if you have changed your mind! " cried Miss Jonas with an unpleasant laugh: and she sat back again in her chair. Two old ladies came to a table near them, and the Loopers, in a state of visible excitement, almost ran through the lounge.

" The Prince has just arrived," said Lady Looper. " We were in the hall and saw him. Red baize—flowers—rows of servants—like in a play."

" I saw the red baize and the flowers," said Patricia. " I thought they were because of the ball to-night. Half the hotel seems to be going."

" They were for royalty," said Sir Joseph in a solemn tone. He looked quite inclined to sing " God save the King."

" What Prince is it? " said Patricia.

" Prince Sergius of Katavia. The doctor Prince, who has renounced the throne to practise medicine. Mr. Broom knows him."

" I wonder if the Prince would own to knowing Mr. Broom," sneered Miss Jonas.

" Why not? " inquired Lady Looper.

" A brewery clerk—a travelling servant—half courier, half secretary! What can he have to do with princes? "

" Great Scott! I'm thirsty," exclaimed Sir Joseph. " What's this? Milk! "

He filled Patricia's glass from the jug that stood

near and drank it to the dregs before any one could stop him. Miss Jonas half rose from her chair, but thought better of it, and sat down again. Lady Looper actually put out her hands, but he moved beyond her reach.

"You know that milk poisons you," she said reproachfully to her husband. "Whether you are ill or well, you've got to take me to the ball to-night!"

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN luncheon was ready only four people sat down at Lady Looper's table. Sir Joseph and Patricia were both ill, it seemed, suddenly and rather violently ill. Sir Joseph had been seized while his wife went to the Spanish Steps to buy flowers, and she came back to find him in the hands of Dr. Pratt, who talked of the hot sun, or, possibly, last night's mayonnaise, a dish he himself had avoided.

"I ate it and am none the worse," said Lady Looper.

"It may be the sun," said the doctor. "It is certainly the sun that has upset Miss Dimsdale again. I warned her, but she would not listen. I understand that she sat on the Pincian for more than an hour this morning."

He looked directly at Mr. Broom, who rarely spoke to him; but he spoke now.

"We sat in the shade," he said.

"Oh!" said Miss Jonas, with artificial surprise. "Were you there, too?"

Mr. Broom only answered her by a slight gesture of assent, and turned to Lady Looper.

"I am sorry to hear Sir Joseph is ill," he said. He had been engaged with Sir Joseph's correspondence in his own room since he came in, and had not been sent for or informed by Dr. Pratt.

"I'm sorry, too," said Lady Looper. "How am I going to the ball to-night? You'll have to dress up as Falstaff, Mr. Broom, and take me."

"I should want a good deal of stuffing," said

Mr. Broom. "I suppose, as you think of going to the ball, Sir Joseph is not very ill."

"Dr. Pratt says he will be all right in two days. I think he will myself. I am not anxious about him."

"Are you anxious about Miss Dimsdale?" said Mr. Broom.

"I've not seen her. Is Miss Dimsdale worse than Sir Joseph?"

Lady Looper addressed the doctor, who had heaped his plate with ravioli, and was eating with unusual haste and appetite. He stopped eating to answer her, and spoke with emphasis.

"She is much worse," he said. Then he went on eating.

Lady Looper looked at Mr. Broom and saw deadly fear in his face; an extremity of fear that the facts, as she knew them, did not justify or explain. For his sake she tackled the doctor again.

"You are not seriously alarmed about her, are you?" she asked.

"I am anxious," he admitted.

"We were anxious in Naples," said Miss Jonas. "But there we had Miss Dimsdale to ourselves and could manage her. She is very self-willed, and lately she has not taken our advice."

No one answered this challenge, and Lady Looper's attention was diverted for a moment by a little group of gentlemen who were being ushered to their places with some ceremony by the manager of the hotel.

"Look! look!" she cried. "That is Prince Sergius of Katavia. He is going to have his lunch down here. I thought he would have had a private room. I wonder who the two gentlemen with him are."

Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas both faced the long room and could see the Prince and his friends come in, but Mr. Broom did not turn his head.

"I thought you knew the Prince?" Miss Jonas said to him.

"I do," he answered.

"You seem in no hurry to attract his attention."

"I am not in a hurry. I am thinking of other things. The sun was not hot this morning."

"Is the Prince considered a clever doctor?" asked Lady Looper.

"Very clever," said Mr. Broom.

"I have never spoken to a Prince," she said naïvely. "Are royalties very alarming?"

"No more than I am myself."

"I can hardly believe that," said the lady. "I never felt a bit afraid of you. The Prince is a little bit like you. Why don't you have a look at him?"

Mr. Broom just turned his head, and as he did so, Miss Jonas saw the Prince glance their way, catch sight of the secretary and apparently recognise him, not with mild indifference, but with a start of excited surprise. He summoned a waiter to his side and seemed to question him: but that was all that happened just then, The waiter retired, and the Prince went on with his lunch. He got up, however, before Lady Looper did, and went a little out of his way to pass her table and stare at it. She stared back with great interest, but Mr. Broom's profile was turned from him, and could not be seen plainly.

"I felt inclined to nod at His Highness," said Lady Looper. "He seemed quite interested in us,"

"But he seems to have forgotten Mr. Broom," said Miss Jonas.

Mr. Broom took no notice of Miss Jonas. When Lady Looper rose he accompanied her, and went to see Sir Joseph, who was lying on the sofa in their private sitting-room. He said that he felt much better and inclined to sleep, but that he would be glad to know if Mr. Broom could write certain letters that ought to be posted to-night.

"Mr. Broom ought to spend the afternoon dressing up as Falstaff," said Lady Looper. "I can't go to the ball unless he takes me. Or rather, I won't."

"I refuse to go as Falstaff," said Mr. Broom. "A lean Falstaff in unthinkable. I'll wear a uniform of my own if you like."

"How do you come by one?"

"Honestly."

"You mean you won't tell me. Is it a nice one?"

"We who wear it think so."

"Scarlet?"

"White and gold."

"White and gold! Don't know it. I suppose you'd rather not go at all."

"Much rather not—unless both the sick people are well again. Can't you insist on seeing Miss Dimsdale? I'm very uneasy, and I can't force my way in."

"I'm not sure that I can do that," said Lady Looper; but she went down the corridor to Patricia's room. In a minute or two she came back saying that she had only seen Miss Jonas, who told her that Patricia was asleep and much better.

"You go and write your letters," she said to the secretary. "I'll have another try later."

The letters were long and troublesome and occupied Mr. Broom for nearly three hours. It was past five o'clock when he went back to the Loopers' room. He found that Sir Joseph was still on the sofa and comfortably asleep: but Lady Looper looked anxious and glad to see him.

"I should have come for you, but I don't see what we can do," she said. "I'm getting worried."

"Is she worse?"

Lady Looper nodded.

"Have you seen her?"

"They won't let us in. That woman has locked the door."

"Isn't Pogson with her?"

Lady Looper shook her head.

"I found Pogson outside—crying—and listening."

"Listening?"

"I'm afraid the poor girl is in pain. It is horrible—horrible. What can we do?"

"We must go in at once, and have another doctor."

"But how can we? What right have we?"

"I have the right. I am going to marry her."

"Never!" cried Lady Looper, and her voice was as shrill as a cock's, so great was her surprise and so little her care not to show it. "We won't say a word to him," she added, pointing to Sir Joseph on the sofa.

"Why not?"

"Well, you know what people will say!"

"I've made up my mind to face that."

"I believe you've nerve to face anything," said Lady Looper.

"We shall want nerve," he said seriously. "I believe that her life is in danger."

"Because she is ill?"

"Because she has fallen among thieves. We must save her."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you," said Mr. Broom.

CHAPTER XV

LADY LOOPER was roused to action. Her malicious little eyes were alight with battle; and when she traversed the long corridor leading to Patricia's room her gait was as brisk and rhythmic as a soldier's march. For Mr. Broom had told her what he had seen on the Vicera cliff, and she had listened with a horror that dried up her power of invective and benumbed her tongue.

"You are quite sure?" she had said.

"Quite sure."

"Why did Patricia ever speak to them again?"

"She has had as little as possible to do with them ever since. Her memory of it is blurred, because it happened in a moment, and when she was nearly fainting with exhaustion. I believe she actually lost consciousness when she fell on her knees."

"Why didn't you tell her you saw them the day before?"

The young man's eyes were sombre and tender as he tried to explain.

"I did tell her and she hardly listened. I could not dwell on it much or remind her later. It was too horrible, Lady Looper. It was like seeing people dig a grave. The less she knows, the less she remembers, the better. As it is, these people have left their mark on her."

"We must get rid of them now."

"We must. What are they brewing in there? Why is she worse and Sir Joseph better? What ails them both? I do not believe in the doctor's sun.

There was not sun enough this morning to cause such sudden violent illness. I do not believe in his mayonnaise either."

Lady Looper, who had got up and was looking at her husband before leaving him, turned suddenly, her face full of a new idea, alarmed and grave.

"They drank from the same glass," she said. "Sir Joseph came in hot and thirsty. He filled up Patricia's glass and drank it."

"Milk?"

"Yes. He likes it."

The next moment they were in the corridor, driven forward by the shock of fresh suspicion. They both felt uncertain of what lay before them; what extremity of sorrow and what exigencies of fight. They knew what must be done, but they could only see from one moment to the next how to do it. They did not even know if they were in time, and the passage from one door to the other, that occupied perhaps half a minute, seemed interminable. For one of them, it was charged with such agonised rage and apprehension, that it seemed to leave behind a life of small sensations and press forward to a new one, where elemental passions burned at the heart and brain and changed them, as if in a furnace, to a harder fibre. When they reached Patricia's door, they heard Patricia's voice, and as they stood still to listen she asked for Pogson.

"You don't want Pogson," said Dr. Pratt, speaking rather loudly. "She could not help you."

"I want her," Patricia said again, and her voice was high and weak with pain.

"I have sent her out," said Dr. Pratt.

"Then let me see Lady Looper."

"She is with Sir Joseph. He is just as ill as you are."

"Will he die?"

"Die! Nonsense. He will be about again in two days."

"I believe I am dying."

"You always do when you have these attacks. You were just as bad in Naples."

"No; not nearly so bad. I am dying. I want to see Lady Looper. She would come, if you told her."

Lady Looper, listening outside, was just going to knock at the door, when a sign from Mr. Broom stopped her. He knew that if they knocked they would be refused admittance, and the doctor was just saying something that promised to unlock the door for a moment.

"I'm going out," he announced, and then he seemed to address Miss Jonas.

"Another dose in an hour," he said, "if I'm not back."

"You won't be back," said Miss Jonas, with a curious inflection of contempt in her voice. "You'll leave it to me."

"Oh! I'll stay if you're afraid," he answered.

"I'm not. If the next dose doesn't do what you expect, shall I give another?"

"The next dose will be effective," said the doctor. "It is stronger than the last."

Lady Looper shuddered. Mr. Broom stood for a moment with his hand on the knob of the door and his shoulder against one of the panels. Then they heard the doctor's step close to them; the key turned in the lock and the door opened. As it did so, Mr. Broom got between it and the lintel, so that unless he moved it could not be shut again. Their sudden unexpected appearance there together, and probably their air of hostile determination, seemed to alarm Dr. Pratt and enrage him. He began to bluster.

"No one can come in," he said. "Miss Dimsdale is very ill."

"We are both coming in," said Lady Looper; and passed into the room in front of Mr. Broom. He was watching Miss Jonas at the moment. He saw her

glance at Dr. Pratt for instructions, discover that he was too flurried to give them, and then act on her own responsibility. Several medicine bottles stood on the chest of drawers, and with these she pretended to busy herself, paying no attention to Patricia's distress or to the scuffle at the door. It had degenerated into a scuffle, because Dr. Pratt actually tried to stop Lady Looper by planting himself in front of her, and Mr. Broom had made a way for the lady by seizing the doctor's arm and pulling him aside. Meanwhile, Patricia lay on the sofa propped by pillows, but evidently still in violent pain. Though she was so ill, no one had helped her to undress yet, no one had put her to bed. She looked more dead than alive already, and callously neglected.

"I consider this a gross intrusion," spluttered the doctor. "An intrusion and an assault. What does it mean?"

Lady Looper did not answer him. She had gone straight up to Patricia.

"You must go to bed at once, my child," she said; and Mr. Broom heard a quiver in her voice that alarmed him. Undeterred by the doctor's scowl and gesture of dismissal, he went up to the sofa and looked at the apparently dying girl. Then he looked at Lady Looper. She turned now to the doctor.

"We listened at the door before you opened it," she said hardily. "We heard what you said to Miss Jonas, and we heard Miss Dimsdale ask for Pogson. She is going to have Pogson and some of the medicine you gave Sir Joseph. If she is not better in an hour, I shall call in another doctor."

"By whose authority?" began Dr. Pratt, swelling with rage.

"It is positively outrageous," cried Miss Jonas, taking her stand beside him. "Do you imagine that we will submit to such treatment?"

"I'm sure you will," said Lady Looper, and before

any of them could stop her she had gone to the door and opened it. Her sharp ears had heard a slight sound outside and she had guessed rightly that Pogson was waiting there again.

"Come in, Pogson," she ordered. "You are to get your mistress to bed and give her the medicine I bring you. She is to have nothing else at all, and you are not to leave her for one moment. You understand?"

"I thank God on my knees, I do, my Lady," cried Pogson, whose screwed-up little eyes were red with tears.

Dr. Pratt made yet one more protest; but it was more weakly made than the former one. He and Miss Jonas both seemed puzzled and uneasy.

"This is my case," he began.

"It was," said Lady Looper sharply. "Now it is mine. It is out of your hands."

"If Miss Dimsdale dies while you are at the ball to-night——"

"The ball! I had forgotten it," said Mr. Broom.

"We will dress for it," said Lady Looper, "but unless Miss Dimsdale is much better we will not go."

"Your position is impossible and dangerous," cried Dr. Pratt, walking beside Lady Looper in the corridor. "I warn you that Miss Dimsdale is seriously ill. You take her case from me without any authority, although you profess yourself entirely satisfied with my treatment of Sir Joseph, who is suffering from a milder form of the same disease."

Lady Looper stopped short for a moment.

"What is the disease?" she asked, and the way of her asking was not what the doctor liked. He changed colour and fell back towards Miss Jonas.

"I told Sir Joseph that the sun——" he stammered.

"Oh—rubbish!" said Lady Looper rudely, and she hurried on. Mr. Broom had turned down the corridor leading to his own room. Miss Jonas looked at

Dr. Pratt. His face was greyish in the dim electric light.

"Are we safe?" she said.

"Quite safe," insisted the doctor. "Sir Joseph makes us safe. I've cured him, and if they had not interfered I should have cured her."

"Perhaps you will, with Sir Joseph's medicine."

"We'll see about that, later," said he.

CHAPTER XVI

THE dining-room presented an unusual appearance that evening, for a good many people staying in the hotel were going to the Embassy Ball and had dressed before dinner. At one table an English Beefeater sat next to Joan of Arc, and at another a young couple in powder and patches were not in the least like Sir Peter and Lady Teazle. As you may imagine, the draperies of Ancient Greece and Rome clothed some figures they did not become; while Queen Elizabeth's hooped skirt and starched ruffle were worn by a lady whose soft face and weak mouth suggested that she could not say "Bo!" to a goose. The Prince's table, set for three, was a little apart from the others and had more flowers and fruit on it. No one sat there yet, when Lady Looper came in and attracted all eyes by the splendid red of her brocade and the magnificence of the pearls and rubies she wore with it. Whether Mrs. Ford ever possessed such jewels was a question that did not trouble her. She did, and she had put them all on to-night, although she had determined she would not go to the ball until another doctor had seen Patricia and reassured her about the girl. She had been into the room again, found Pogson quietly on guard there, and Patricia much exhausted, but already relieved by Sir Joseph's medicine, administered an hour ago. With a fresh caution to Pogson to stay where she was, and let no one in, Lady Looper had come down to dine, to see other people's costumes and to display her own.

She took her place at the head of her own table,

and, summoning the head waiter, ordered wine. Hors d'œuvres were offered her and she helped herself. She was quite composed and behaved exactly as she would have done at an empty table. But Miss Jonas and Dr. Pratt sat with her, and had tried to speak before she sat down. It is difficult to speak to a person who knows you are there but blandly refuses to see you. They began to talk to each other, but that did not lighten their discomfort, and at a moment when Lady Looper could not avoid hearing him, the doctor managed to catch her eye and addressed her. He spoke with his usual smoothness, and this exasperated her more than his occasional truculence ever did. To pretend that nothing had happened, after what had happened in Patricia's room, was brazen.

"I looked in on Sir Joseph on my way down," he said. "He was sleeping very comfortably. I think he will be about again in a day or two."

"I hope so," said Lady Looper shortly.

"I will see him again to-morrow."

"I shall take good care you don't," said Lady Looper, with a ruder emphasis than is customary amongst polite people.

"Do you always treat your doctors in this way?" said Miss Jonas acidly. "You must change them often."

"I'm glad to say we've no use for doctors," said Lady Looper. "We're always quite well."

"Sir Joseph wasn't well this morning. If your maid had not come running for Dr. Pratt——"

"My maid is an owl. I always knew it," said Lady Looper. "There are very good doctors in Rome. I'm going to have one in directly after dinner."

"I don't know what your good doctor can do more than cure his patient."

"He can diagnose his cases," said Lady Looper. "I'm not satisfied. Both Sir Joseph and Miss Dimsdale were made ill by some milk."

"Possibly!" said the doctor, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, and then he turned to Miss Jonas and made some remark that led on to a dialogue. They did not try just then to continue the conversation with Lady Looper.

She was looking at Prince Sergius of Katavia, who had just come in with his two friends. The Prince and one of the gentlemen with him were in plain evening dress; the other was in a grey uniform. As they passed Lady Looper's table the Prince looked at it, and then spoke to his friends. They looked her way again, once or twice, after they had sat down and were served; and she wondered whether it was Mr. Broom whom they had noted and now missed. But, interested as she was in the Prince, her interest was very soon diverted by the entrance and triumphal progress down the room of her husband's secretary, arrayed in such glory that every eye in the room met him and followed him till he reached her end of it. What he had modestly described as "a uniform" was the full-dress magnificence of a Colonel of Hussars of Katavia, and though Lady Looper did not recognise to what country it belonged, she saw that it was far and away the most splendid dress in the room. The cloth of it was white, the facings were blue, there was gold lace and cord, the short pelisse flung over his left shoulder was lined with leopard skin, his gloved hand was on his trailing sabre, and under his arm he carried a busby with a golden flap and a plume of eagle feathers.

"Here comes a jay dressed in eagle's feathers," misquoted the doctor, sourly watching the sensation made by the young man, whose height and carriage were so well displayed by his clothes that it seemed as if the gods were with him to-night, lending him new strength and beauty.

"Perhaps his friend the Prince will recognise him now," said Miss Jonas with a sneer.

"What uniform is it?" asked the doctor, but no one answered him. Lady Looper was watching Prince Sergius and his friends with fixed attention, for the Prince was behaving unexpectedly. He faced the long room, and when Mr. Broom entered it, His Highness adjusted his glasses, as a short-sighted man will when he wants to see what is just beyond his range. She perceived that he spoke to the gentlemen on either side of him and that they too were watching Mr. Broom. He advanced with deliberate leisure and had his eyes on the Prince's table, ready, as it seemed to Lady Looper, for what happened: and what happened was wholly surprising to every one else present. For, as Mr. Broom approached, the Prince rose; the gentlemen with him rose too, and stood in fixed polite attention, while their royal companion hurried towards Mr. Broom, and with every token of surprise and delight, kissed him fraternally on both cheeks. Some words passed between them that no one overheard, and then, the Prince drew Mr. Broom to his own table and waived him with a smile to his own seat. His friends listened with bent respectful heads, while Mr. Broom, whose head was carried high, said something to them that Lady Looper could not hear. Then, to her delight, the secretary saluted the Prince, left his table, and came to his usual seat at hers.

"Well! You have made a sensation!" she said as he came close. "The Prince hugged you as if you were his long-lost brother."

"Does he always kiss his acquaintances?" said Miss Jonas derisively.

Mr. Broom helped himself to the dish going round, and did not inform Miss Jonas.

"I wonder how you came to know him so well," said Dr. Pratt meditatively. "I begin to think you are a clever young man. First a Prince of Katavia, then Lady Looper, then——"

Perhaps he would have been content to stop there, but Miss Jonas, who was livid with rage by this time, could not restrain herself. The last half-hour had been one of bitter and increasing mortifications, beginning with Lady Looper's treatment of them, and coming to a climax now, when the secretary would not speak to her.

"Poor dear Patricia would be more useful to an adventurer than any foreign prince," she said in an audible whisper to Dr. Pratt.

Lady Looper heard plainly, and was just going to enter the fray with zest when Mr. Broom surprised her. He rose from his seat and went to the Prince's table again. She could not hear what was said, but she saw the Prince speak to a waiter at his elbow, saw several other waiters hurry forward, saw Mr. Broom come slowly back, and, with a gesture that was a command rather than a request, caused her to rise and follow him.

"The Prince invites us both to sit with him," he said. "His Highness desires to know a lady who has been so kind to me. For my part, Lady Looper, I will not be at the same table again with these persons or meet them on terms of equality or conceal my distrust and aversion. If they please they may take what I say as a warning."

With this he signed to the amazed lady to pass before him, and turned his back on the two petrified people left sitting at the deserted table.

CHAPTER XVII

LADY LOOPER was shrewd enough to be puzzled by the state of things at the Prince's table. She told Sir Joseph later, that, from the moment she took her place, she felt sure " something " was up. The Prince and her secretary met each other as equals, but were treated by their friends with a deference that one could only expect by habit and tradition. Moreover, Mr. Broom behaved as a man does who, after a long sojourn among aliens, finds himself at home and at ease again. His manner had a new graciousness, and though she knew him to be oppressed by anxiety, she watched him sit at table as if no cloud was threatening his dearest hope. But while he talked pleasantly, he did not lose sight of the two people left at the adjoining table, and when they got up to go, before dinner was quite finished, he half rose as if to follow them, and then, sitting down again, spoke to Lady Looper.

" I suppose we can trust Pogson," he said. " Our orders were explicit."

" We have dressed for the ball, but I can see that we shall not get there," said Lady Looper. " You would not have a happy moment, if you left the hotel to-night."

" I hoped you would say so," admitted Mr. Broom.

Lady Looper turned to the Prince.

" This is what happens when a young man falls in love," she said. " We old folk go to the wall. "

Her jest made a commotion she had not expected. The Prince looked up sharply, and the two gentlemen

with him were silent with an air of surprised alert attention, that showed they were agog for more light, but too courteous to ask for it.

"He is the lucky young man of the fairy tale," continued Lady Looper, pleased by the effect she had made. "May I tell His Highness of your good fortune, Mr. Broom? Perhaps with his influence to support you it will really happen, impossible as it seems."

"If my private affairs possess any interest for His Highness," Mr. Broom began rather stiffly; and then, as if on second thoughts, he changed his mind. He said in a different tone, "Yes, go on."

"In fairy tales the younger son always runs away in quest of adventures and of fortune," said Lady Looper. "He always ends by marrying the king's daughter."

"Who is Pogson?" asked the Prince.

"Pogson is the young lady's maid."

"I know of no king's daughter in this hotel," said the Prince, for the first time speaking with an air of chilly pride that acted like a dash of cold water on Lady Looper's expansiveness.

"Well—well," she said with signs of flurry. "I speak in metaphor, your Highness. The young lady is not in the Almanach de Gotha."

"Then she cannot marry into a royal house."

"She could marry anywhere. She is the richest girl in England," said Lady Looper.

The Prince smiled a little, but his face was ironical and grave. It struck Lady Looper again that he really was rather like Mr. Broom. Her husband's secretary had often smiled in the same way when she said something with which he did not agree. She looked at him now to catch the likeness more surely, and saw that he was getting impatient.

"The young lady is going to marry Mr. Broom," she said triumphantly.

"If she lives," said the secretary.

"Is she ill, then?" asked Prince Sergius.

"While we sit here and babble, she may die," cried the young man, and with a breach of manners that shocked Lady Looper, he did not wait for the Prince to rise, but pushed back his chair, got up, and actually signed to His Highness to follow him.

"Come," he said, without any ado. "I want to talk to you, and then I want you to see her."

The two young men walked through the long room side by side, followed with eager interest by every eye. They talked to each other in undertones and in a language most people present did not understand.

"He is really off his head with worry and excitement," said Lady Looper in an explanatory way to the two gentlemen left behind with her. "As a rule, his manners are perfect."

The two gentlemen bowed with an air of somewhat amused assent.

"I'm talking of Mr. Broom," she said.

They bowed again.

"He is my husband's secretary, and of course he hasn't a penny," she went on volubly. "But I like him, and if a great hēiress chooses to fall in love with him, I say 'Why not?' Anyone can see that he has breeding; his looks are top-hole, and I know he's a good sort. What more does a girl want?"

"It remains to be seen whether the marriage will be allowed," said one of the two gentlemen who wore several orders, and looked as if he might be diplomatic and important. Then they moved down the room and into the hall, which at the moment was full of other people who had just dined. But though there was a throng, Lady Looper's quick eyes caught sight of Pogson, crouching close to the foot of the stairs and eagerly scanning everyone that came out of the dining-room. The moment Lady Looper appeared she ran forward and addressed her. She was white with

wrath, still red round the eyes with tears, and she took no notice of the two distinguished gentlemen who were with the lady she had sought and found.

"They've turned me out of the room," she cried.

"You dolt," answered Lady Looper instantly. "Why did you let them in?"

"I never did. They got that silly Teresa to unlock the door again, and when they were in, they were in, I couldn't get them out. I shook my fist at them, and then the doctor 'e pushed me into the corridor and turned the key on me. I shouted through the key-hole to my young lady not to take anything they gave her, but whether she heard me I can't say. She's been very bad again."

"I'm going straight to her," said Lady Looper, hurrying upstairs. "You go and see whether Sir Joseph wants anything, and then find Mr. Broom, and tell him I must have a doctor at once."

On the top of the stairs they parted, and Pogson went to the Loopers' sitting-room, where she found Mr. Broom and a strange gentleman. She paid no attention to the stranger, but stared at Mr. Broom, whom at first she hardly recognised. "Fine feathers do make fine birds," she thought to herself.

"What is it, Pogson?" said Mr. Broom. "Why have you left Miss Dimsdale? She isn't worse?"

"Where's Sir Joseph, sir?" asked Pogson, looking round. Her mind liked to work slowly and in order.

"He has gone to bed. He is all right. But your mistress?"

"Her ladyship has gone to her now, sir; and if you please will you get a doctor at once?"

"Come," said Mr. Broom to the gentleman with him.

"You've got one already!" exclaimed Pogson. "Then I'd like to tell him something about my lady's illness.

"I've told him all there is to know," said Mr. Broom. "We mustn't waste any more time."

"Pardon me, sir," urged Pogson. "I know more than you do. I know why she got better at the last place." The two men looked at each other, and Prince Sergius spoke.

"Tell us what you know," he said.

"I felt sure it was the medicine as made 'er ill," narrated Pogson. "Every time she took it she was bad. We told the doctor so, but he only sneered and tried to drive me away. She was bad in Naples and she was bad the day we got to Vicera. After that, she got better."

"The medicine was stopped, or changed?" asked the Prince.

"It was changed," said Pogson stolidly. "I changed it. I kept peppermint for my spasms, and the medicine smelt strong of peppermint and looked like water. There was a bit of sediment; I put that in too. Tooth-powder. It never hurt her."

"Did you think of keeping any of the medicine or did you throw it all away?" asked the Prince.

"I kept a bottleful. It was no use my saying anything. They'd have made out I put it in most likely. But I tried it; and then I knew."

"You tried it?"

"On a cat. It died."

"I remember," said Mr. Broom.

CHAPTER XVIII

MEANWHILE Lady Looper had knocked at Patricia's door and found it locked. No one answered her knock; though, when she listened, she heard people moving and speaking inside. They spoke in such low voices that she could not hear a word they said. She was not a person to be daunted by the idea of a scene, so, when, her second knock remained unanswered, she said in a loud, clear voice—

"If this door is not opened at once I shall call the manager."

She waited a moment, heard some one come towards the door, and saw it opened by Miss Jonas.

"You are not going to force yourself upon us again, I hope," she said, looking at Lady Looper's costume and at her puffed-out hair with unconcealed derision.

"I've no use for you at all," said Lady Looper. "I've come to see Miss Dimsdale."

"You will not be allowed to see her," said Miss Jonas. "Dr. Pratt and I have reconsidered our position and must refuse to give up our responsibilities, because an hotel acquaintance has the impertinence to demand it. If you don't go away at once, we shall ring for the manager ourselves."

With many people such effrontery as this might have succeeded, or at any rate gained time; but when Lady Looper was girt for battle, bluff could

not turn her. She kept her foot within the door and her eye on the passage. As she saw no one else coming, she turned her head and looked at the doctor who sat at a table making up a bottle of medicine.

"What are you doing with that medicine?" she asked sharply.

"Improving the flavour," he replied; and his voice was insolent as well as smooth.

"Do you suppose that, if Miss Dimsdale died, there would be no inquiry?" said Lady Looper, speaking in a low voice so that it should not reach the inner room, where Patricia lay in bed. "Do you suppose we should not act on our suspicions?"

"By 'we' do you mean you and Mr. Broom?"

"Yes; and Sir Joseph."

"I don't think you would," said the doctor. "At least I should advise you not to. It might look quite ugly for you."

"For me? Are you crazy?"

"Not at all. Your elderly husband and a girl who stands a little in your way have both been suddenly and mysteriously ill. A servant you trust brought them milk which they both drank. I save the husband, admittedly against your wishes. You do your best to remove me both from him and this unfortunate girl. Do you suppose I've no suspicions? I'm afraid you've allowed the handsome secretary, whom I take to be an adventurer of the most unscrupulous kind——"

He stopped because Lady Looper took him by surprise. She heard him, she said something under her breath about impudence and scoundrels, she shouted to some one he could not see to hurry up, and then by the momentum of her heavy body she dashed successfully beyond Miss Jonas into the middle of the room. As Miss Jonas, very much

ruffled, turned to follow her, Prince Sergius, Mr. Broom, and Pogson came in too, and shut the door after them. They all three went with Lady Looper to the inner room where Patricia, awakened by the noise, lay open-eyed, but too ill and weak to ask what was happening. But she recognised the three people she knew, and the Prince she did not notice. Her glance sought the resplendent figure of her lover, and he went nearer because he saw that she wished to speak to him.

"I'm going," she said in a whisper.

He had sat down beside the bed so as to be nearer to her, and, when she said this, he put his hand on hers. He could not speak. It moved and shocked him more than he had foreseen to find the girl he had loved and wooed this morning so near her end.

"I want to marry you before I go," she went on. "I want all I have to be yours."

He shook his head slightly in denial: and that seemed to trouble her. She looked at Lady Looper.

"I want it so much," she said. "I want to be his wife before I die."

"Perhaps you will not die," said the stranger, coming forward. He took her hand in his to feel her pulse, and turning to Pogson he asked one or two questions in a low voice.

"Are you a doctor?" said Patricia, evidently puzzled by his presence.

"This is His Highness Prince Sergius of Katavia," said Lady Looper. "At our request he has accepted the case."

"But I do not choose to give up the case to a doctor of whose qualifications I know nothing," said Dr. Pratt, who had come into the room with Miss Jonas. "Sir, this young lady left her home in charge of Miss Jonas and myself."

"You are relieved of your charge," said the Prince, turning on him sternly. He then examined his patient again, paying no attention to the other persons in the room. When he was satisfied, he beckoned Pogson to him, gave her certain orders and wrote a prescription that he said must be made up and brought to him at once.

"I shall remain here for the present," he said, addressing Lady Looper, and then he signed to her and to Mr. Broom to pass before him into the outer room, where Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas were now standing in whispered colloquy. He shut the door between the two rooms and then he spoke straight to the doctor.

"I suspect arsenic poisoning," he said.

"So do I," said Dr. Pratt. "In fact, I'm sure of it."

"I suppose you are sure," the Prince said dryly.

"I suspected it the moment Sir Joseph was taken ill this morning. I treated him and he is better. If I had been allowed to attend Miss Dimsdale without interference——"

"She would now be dead," interrupted Mr. Broom, speaking with a vehemence most unusual to him. "If she does die I'll see to it that you do—on the gallows."

The doctor's face was greyish now in the electric light, but he still tried to bluff and to appear at ease. Miss Jonas watched him anxiously.

"I suspect the milk," he said. "They both drank it. Pogson brought it in."

"Are you going to accuse Pogson now?" exclaimed Lady Looper.

"I consider her a tool," said the doctor.

"In whose hands?" said Mr. Broom.

"If I am driven to it, I have a defence," said the doctor, pointing an accusing hand at Lady Looper,

who was bristling with denial and indignation. "That old harridan wanted them both out of the way."

"Did you ever hear such wickedness?" cried the lady. "He thinks that such a story would go down with foreign police and in foreign law-courts, and perhaps it would."

"It is not the first time that an old woman has risked everything for the sake of a young man," said Miss Jonas, half closing her viperish eyes.

"Enough of this," said the Prince, and low as his voice was it seemed to dominate the room. "You evidently do not know what we have in our hands."

"I do not," said Dr. Pratt.

"We have the medicine you administered to the lady in Naples and Vicera—the remains of a large bottle—enough to convict you if she dies."

"That's a cock-and-bull story," blustered Dr. Pratt, but by this time he had edged very close to the door.

"The lady was ill while she took what you gave her in Naples. When her maid began to suspect you, she changed the medicine for something harmless and the lady recovered. I believe the maid's story."

"Pogson!" exclaimed Miss Jonas, and uttering the name like a cry she slipped out of the room. A confession in words could hardly have betrayed more, and the doctor looked after her angrily.

"Your Highness has been got at," he said. "However, if you want me, you will know where to find me."

Then he followed Miss Jonas. The three people left behind looked at each other.

"Are we to inform the police?" said the Prince.

"Will she live?" said Mr. Broom, his face heavy with anxiety.

"I shall know before long," said the Prince.

"Don't let us be worried by police now," said Lady Looper. "Our business is to save Patricia, and we should find a lot of stupid policemen in our way."

CHAPTER XIX

ALL night long the Prince, Lady Looper, and Pogson wrestled with death: while Mr. Broom waited in chill suspense for such news as they could give him from hour to hour. Once, during a lull, His Serene Highness examined certain phials and powders that Dr. Pratt had left behind: but he found nothing harmful amongst them. No doubt Miss Jonas had carried away anything that might have been incriminating.

"You will find in the morning that they have taken themselves off," said the Prince. "We ought to have had them arrested."

"Are you going to save her?" said Lady Looper, who was not used to royalties, and could not remember that the quiet capable young doctor watching with her should have been addressed with greater ceremony. He seemed to forget it too.

"I think I shall save her," he replied.

"Then take no note of them and let them go," said Lady Looper; "and thank God we are rid of two knaves."

This Dogberryish way of dealing with criminals did not commend itself to the Prince or Mr. Broom, but they agreed that it would be a difficult business to bring and prove a charge of attempted murder against two English people in Italy. The question of what they were to do with regard to Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas was left unsettled for the moment, because nothing at all could be done in the middle

of the night, and when morning came they would know for certain whether Patricia would live.

It was dawn and a grey light was stealing into the room when the Prince found Mr. Broom standing beside a window he had just opened, and told him the girl was quietly asleep and out of pain. Both young men looked haggard with watching, and both looked embarrassed. They sat down beside each other on a sofa, but they avoided each other's eyes.

"She is lovely," said Prince Sergius. "Lovely and good, her eyes are as blue as heaven, and as truthful. I am glad she is going to live."

"You have saved her for me," said Mr. Broom.

"But that is impossible, and you know it."

"I shall write to-day and announce my engagement."

"The Duke is very ill."

"We shall be married in the cathedral at Rudno the moment the formalities can be arranged. There is no reason for delay."

"There are serious reasons," began the Prince heatedly; but he could not produce them, because just then Lady Looper came into the room, a weary, dishevelled happy old woman. She sat down near Mr. Broom and patted his hand affectionately.

"We've dished them, thanks to His Highness," she said. "You must cheer up now, dear boy."

"Do you think Patricia would mind being married at Rudno?" he said. "It is a custom in my family. The men are always married in the cathedral at Rudno."

"But you are English," said Lady Looper. "In England a marriage takes place from the bride's home. Patricia will expect you to come to Liston Park."

"I shall ask her to come with me to Avlona, and then to Rudno."

"But, my dear man, she can't do that—till you are married."

"She could if you and Sir Joseph would make my debt to you still heavier—by accompanying her. I promise to find you an efficient secretary in Rudno. Patricia could come with you and Sir Joseph. Probably next week we could be married."

"She will want more new clothes than she can possibly buy in a week," said Lady Looper. "I think you will have to make up your mind to wait and to come to England."

"I must see Patricia," said Mr. Broom.

"He's a lucky young man," said Lady Looper, turning to the Prince. "Do you know how lucky he is?"

"I consider the marriage unsuitable," began the Prince stiffly; but Mr. Broom's eyes held and stopped him.

"I have your promise," he said, with a suavity that had an edge of steel behind it.

"I did not know all the circumstances."

"I insist on managing my own affairs."

It seemed to Lady Looper that her secretary was addressing a personage of rank in a strangely commanding and irreverent way; and she wondered that the Prince did not resent it. He looked ruffled and serious, but he only bowed in acquiescence when Mr. Broom as good as told him to mind his own business.

"As far as property goes, the marriage is most unequal," she began; thinking to smooth things by pointing out that, though Mr. Broom was poor he was honest, clever, and attractive. She would have used more words, but that in the end was all she had to say about him. However, the Prince stared at her, as if she had said something that did not meet the case.

"It is not a question of property," he replied.

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"The young lady is very charming, and you say she is well off——"

"Well off!"

Lady Looper turned to the secretary, and whispered in his ear.

"Tell him she could buy up Katavia," she said; "I don't like to."

"I don't like to either," said Mr. Broom, smiling.

"H—m!" said Lady Looper, "I should have thought you didn't mind what you said to him."

She waited a moment while she gathered her ideas and then she said to Prince Sergius—

"You don't know anything against Mr. Broom, do you? He isn't married already, I suppose?"

The Prince smiled, too, and got up from the sofa. "I must go back to my patient," he said. "Mr. Broom knows why I oppose his marriage."

"Why does he oppose it?" asked Lady Looper, directly the Prince was out of hearing.

"From a high sense of duty, I believe," said Mr. Broom.

"I see his point of view, but I can't take it," said Lady Looper. "I want it to come off."

"So do I," said Mr. Broom.

By this time there were sounds of life in the hotel, and saying that he would try to get Lady Looper some early coffee he went downstairs. He was away for about half an hour, and when he returned he brought news with him.

"They've decamped," he said, the moment he entered the room. "I've been talking to the manager. They packed in a great hurry and left last night. No one knew, except the hall porter and one or two of the other servants. Every one was busy, I suppose, and they had no bill to ask for and pay. They just sent for a cab and went off."

"You look quite angry," said Lady Looper. "I'm thankful to be quit of them."

"It amounts to a confession," said Mr. Broom. "They ought to be brought to justice. I don't like letting knaves escape. They will have other victims."

"Patricia has been awake," said Lady Looper, artfully trying to divert his thoughts.

"I will see her at once," said Mr. Broom. "I want to betroth myself to her before witnesses to-day, if she is willing. In Katavia a public betrothal is a solemn and binding ceremony. It precedes marriage and is rarely set aside."

"But it is not religious, I suppose?"

"No. It has neither legal nor religious sanction. But, in my country, when a man or woman have given their promise to each other in the presence of friends, their marriage follows. I wish we could be married here to-day, but that is impossible."

"You are in a hurry," said Lady Looper.

"I want to make sure of Patricia."

"Do you want us to take her to Katavia and to come to your wedding?"

"I do, indeed."

"I wonder what Sir Joseph will say?" thought Lady Looper; and she was so anxious to know that she went straight to him, while Pogson took Mr. Broom in to see Patricia.

"I can't think why he wants to be married in Katavia," she said, when she had told her good man the whole story and listened to his amazed comments on it.

"If he wants to be, he will be," said Sir Joseph. "Patricia will give in to him, and so shall we. I am quite determined, my dear, that my next secretary shall be a plain, small man, with meek manners. We must tell Mr. Broom so, if he is going to find one for us."

"Even the Prince gives in to him," said Lady Looper: and then they went together to see Patricia, who lay on a sofa in her sitting-room and was dressed

in a white gown that had opal tints in it. Pogson had brought in great quantities of flowers from the Spanish Steps and was arranging them as her mistress directed.

"He is coming back directly," Patricia said. "The Prince is coming with him. We are going to exchange rings in your presence, and when we are married in the cathedral at Rudno, by the old Archbishop who baptised him, the same rings will be used."

"What an odd ceremony!" said Sir Joseph.

"It is the custom in Katavia," said Patricia; and then the two young men came in. Mr. Broom had two plain gold rings with him. Lady Looper noticed that he entered the room before the Prince. He looked radiant with happiness, but the Prince still looked serious and troubled. He was silent while Mr. Broom knelt down beside the couch, and put one of the rings on the third finger of Patricia's left hand. He spoke to her as he did this, but she only could hear what he said.

"Will you come with me over the hills and far away?" he asked:—and she answered with her eyes, as she put the other ring on his left hand. The four witnesses stood round silently, until Mr. Broom rose to his feet again and said to the Prince—

"My betrothal to this lady will be announced by telegram immediately. We shall travel, when she is well enough, and be married in Rudno as soon as possible after our arrival." The Prince only bowed.

"But you look like a married woman already, with that plain gold ring on your left hand," objected Lady Looper.

"In Katavia the marriage ring is worn on the right hand," said Mr. Broom. "Every one there who sees it on Patricia's left hand will know that she is only betrothed to me."

"But why do you attach so much value to the

ways of Katavia?" asked Sir Joseph. "I suppose when you are married, you and your wife will live in England on her property."

"I have explained to Patricia that my duties will keep me in Katavia," said Mr. Broom.

CHAPTER XX

"PUTTING this and that together," said Lady Looper, "I have suspicions. So has Pogson."

"What sort of suspicions?" said Sir Joseph, who was tired and in a prosaic mood.

"Patricia will never be Mrs. Broom."

"What a terrible thing to say."

"Not a bit of it. She'll marry the secretary and live happy ever after; but she'll have a surprise first."

Sir Joseph could show a lack of interest that exasperated his wife, and he did so now. He changed the subject and began to grumble.

"The whole thing is absurd," he said. "We engage a young man to write my letters and we take him abroad. He is lucky enough to attract an Englishwoman with money, and must needs bring her all the way here for their marriage. We follow like sheep, and I have to manage my own correspondence. Why did Patricia consent? Why are we on our way to Avlona?"

"Dear Joseph!" said Lady Looper.

"But you don't answer my questions," said Sir Joseph.

"I will. We are on our way to Avlona, because the Prince and Mr. Broom insisted on our coming: and when we get there, we shall see what we shall see. I have my ideas."

They were in a car, and were not far from Avlona. At Rudno, where they left the train, their party had been received with all the honours accorded to

members of the reigning house, and Patricia had walked to her car between the Prince and Mr. Broom, while the little crowd on the platform made a curtsying lane for them. Four cars were waiting outside: one for Prince Sergius, one for the betrothed pair, one for the Loopers, and one for the servants of the party. Before they started Prince Sergius came up to Mr. Broom, shook him warmly by the hand, and wished him good luck. Then he got into the car waiting just behind.

"Isn't the Prince coming to Avlona?" said Patricia.

"No," said Mr. Broom. "He will go some way with us, and then stop at his own home: a house that belonged to his father, Prince Severus."

"Are we going by ourselves to the Duke's palace?" asked Patricia, a little nervous and surprised.

"Yes; we are," said Mr. Broom.

"But does the Duke expect us?"

"He has been told: but he is ill, poor old man! I'm afraid he does not realise things. They mean to appoint a Regent."

"Prince Sergius?"

"No," said Mr. Broom.

"There is another Prince, isn't there? The one who ran away. What was his name?"

"Torquil," said Mr. Broom.

Patricia looked at her betrothed. He had dressed in his Hussar uniform for the last stages of their long journey, and, as he sat beside her in the car, she had a sudden, swift impression of him as a stranger, a stately man, handsome, dignified, filling a high position with scruple and success. At the station he had saluted people when the Prince did; he had told her to bow when the crowd cheered, and the car drove away.

"It is the custom here," he had said. The streets of the little town had looked delightfully old and

picturesque, and they had stopped the car for a moment to look at the cathedral.

"That is where the Dukes of Katavia are crowned and married," he had said. Then they had passed a palace with sentries in front and a park behind.

"That is where the family spends the winter," he informed her.

"I am so glad we have come," Patricia cried. "What a dear little, quaint town! What strange, beautiful clothes the peasants wear! What rows and rows of soldiers all saluting us! There is your regiment in white and gold. I suppose they have turned out in honour of Prince Sergius. Surely his car ought not to have been behind ours?"

But Mr. Broom was so much occupied with returning salutes that he did not answer Patricia's question, and when in a few minutes they left the little town she was too much interested in the beauty of the scenery to repeat it. For the car was taking them now through the forest that stretches from Rudno to Avlona, a way of diversified and extraordinary charm. There were high hills on either side of them, hills clothed with larches, still tipped in pale green. Little mountain torrents tumbled down narrow beds to join the bigger torrent beside the road, and quickly as the car carried them, Patricia could see that this was a paradise of ferns and flowers.

"How long shall we stay at Avlona?" she asked, when they were close to the castle.

"As long as we please," said Mr. Broom; and then the gates opened to let the three cars through.

"This is the moment for which I have waited ever since I first saw you," said Mr. Broom in a low whisper. "To have you here, with me, at Avlona, always."

"Always!" cried Patricia. Her lovely face was pale with premonition and surprise. As she spoke, the car reached the terrace in front of the castle, and

there burst upon her the sudden view of the sea that is its pride. She saw the grey, ancient turrets, the myriad windows, and at the widely opened doors a crowd of people. Some were servants, and some were high officers and ladies of the court, and when the car stopped every one present curtsied to Mr. Broom. He saluted, and then he presented Patricia. He called her his bride, because in Katavia a betrothed girl, all through her engagement, is called the bride of the man she is to marry, and not only on the wedding-day. Then he turned to the Loopers, who had just arrived, and introduced to them an old gentleman, one who wore many orders on his coat.

"This is Prince Lussin, the Duke's Chancellor," he said. "Prince Lussin, I beg you to do all you can for Sir Joseph and Lady Looper, who have been kind to me while I was away."

"The commands of Your Highness——" began the old Chancellor, and then he was quite overcome, for the young man seized both his hands and kissed him on the cheek. The Loopers got out of their car and went up to Patricia.

"What is going on?" asked Lady Looper.

"I hardly know," said the girl, looking rather scared and lonely.

"Who is that gentleman?" said Lady Looper, turning to the chauffeur and pointing to Mr. Broom.

"That is His Highness the Hereditary Prince of Katavia," said the chauffeur with unction, and naturally with surprise. "'Our Torquil' the people used to call him, but now he is the Hereditary Prince. When the old Duke dies he will reign in Katavia. May his day be a long one! He is greatly beloved in the country."

Prince Torquil came forward as the man finished speaking, and he took Patricia by the hand.

"Come!" he said. "The Duke will see us, but

Lussin says he may not know us. I fear he is not much longer for this world."

"But, Torquil," said Patricia, whispering to him, as they were ushered through the palace to the Duke's rooms: "Can you, if you are royal, marry me though I am not?"

"There is no Royal Marriage Act in Katavia," said Prince Torquil. "I can marry whom I please, and our marriage will be valid in my country and in yours. I have ascertained that. We shall make our State entry into Rudno next Tuesday, and on Thursday we shall be married in the cathedral. You will wear the diamond crown which the brides of my house always wear; there will be great rejoicings, and after the marriage we shall come back here, to Avlona, beloved."

"But will your people welcome a bride who is not royal?"

"You have seen how they welcomed you at Rudno."

Then they entered the Duke's presence. The poor old man was in bed, and wandering a little in his mind. He recognised his nephew and seemed glad to see him: but about Patricia he cherished an odd, pathetic delusion. He took her for Flosshilda of Gothland, and thought that she had come to marry him and that they there were both young again.

"I am Patricia," said the girl, as she knelt by the bedside. "I am to marry Torquil."

"You are Flosshilda," said the Duke. "You are Princess Flosshilda, and I have loved you all my life."

When the Chancellor was told of the Duke's delusion, and of his delight in Patricia's beautiful presence, he said that these things smoothed a difficult way for them. Patricia could be made Duchess of Avlona, a semi-royal title in the gift of the Duke, and as Duchess of Avlona she could make

her State entry into Rudno and be married in the cathedral, amidst the blare of trumpets and the applauding shouts of a loyal and delighted people.

"What fun!" said Lady Looper, when she was informed of these arrangements, and invited to share in them. "Dear Joseph! You asked why we came to Avlona. Now you know. I shall want a new diamond tiara for the occasion."

"I'll give you one, Miladi," said Prince Torquil. "I'll give you one, and on the back of it I'll have a date inscribed with three names. The date will be the night of the Embassy Ball in Rome, and the names shall be yours, my brother's, and Pogson's."

"Poor Pogson," said Patricia. "She said this morning she didn't mind living in a palace, and she still thinks Torquil a very nice gentleman, though he is a furren prince, and not an Englishman. What she doesn't like is the idea of calling me 'Yer 'Ighness,' and trying to express her wishes in the language of Katavia."

"She must follow your example and marry a man of Katavia," said Prince Torquil.

"I am going to marry Mr. Broom," said Patricia.

PART II

THE CHILDREN OF ORA

CHAPTER I

THE south-west corner of Katavia is a land of forests. Here and there you come upon a straggling village with ancient thatched and wooden houses, a village inhabited by foresters and farming folk. But in that region you never get away from the forest for long and you do not find a town or any society of educated people. Even the villages are a long way from each other, and except in summer there is little intercourse between them. It is a beautiful land, broken by mountain crags, traversed by streams and rivers, opening here and there on pastures, but always coming back to the scent and magic of the forest.

Sandra Vavarin and her brother Philip were growing up in it without realising how entirely they were lost to the world and the world to them. They were not complete savages, because old Malwina had always looked after their bodies, and Father Milias, the priest from the nearest village, had taught them to read and write. But they were not receiving the education or living in the way to which their birth and prospects entitled them. Philip was heir to one of the oldest titles in the duchy, to the castle of Ora and the forest round it, and through his mother to a large fortune besides. The children never saw their father, and their mother was dead. They knew little about their parents or their family history, for they only saw Father Milias and Malwina, who did not gossip to them. Malwina had come to the castle when Sandra was born and knew of the tragedy that drove the child's mother to her doom and banished

her father from Ora for ever. There had been no public scandal. The lady had drowned herself—the lover had got away, the offended husband accepted a diplomatic post in Berlin and never set eyes on his home or the children there again. Sandra, who was five years older than her brother, could remember Prince Vavarin : remembered him as a dark, scowling man who terrified her. Philip had only been a year old at the time of the catastrophe, so he did not remember his parents or miss them. Sandra and the forest made his world just as he and the forest made Sandra's world. The brother and sister could not imagine themselves anywhere except in a wing of Castle Ora, with Malwina guarding them and the forest calling them. The castle was miles away from other houses of the kind, the children had no friends, no servants except Malwina, no clothes except what she bought for them, no food except what she could provide. When it was warm they lived in the forest, when it was cold they played indoors. They both believed in the legends of the forest, and they both loved its scents, its gloom, its pathways, its flowers and fruits and its freedom, as they loved each other, half consciously, but as dearly as life itself.

Sandra did not look her age of seventeen. She was thin, not fully formed yet, dark-haired, grey-eyed. Her carriage was active and graceful, her glance candid, her manner modest but at times imperious. She was Alexandra Vavarin. Yet she still wore her hair in a pig-tail and scoured the forest in plain, childish clothes. The question of clothes and other questions, more important, never troubled Malwina, who belonged to the peasant class and was faithful, but stupid and uninformed. She did not realise that the babies left with her eleven years ago were babies no longer, and ought to be both learning and enjoying many things that neither Father Milias nor she could give them. She taught them at times

that they were Vavarins, but she called them Sandra and Philip, sat down to meals with them, scolded them, ordered them, worked for them, and when Philip was ill nursed him devotedly. For though he lived in the forest Philip was a delicate boy and had been difficult to rear. He did not look like any of the Vavarins whose portraits were in the banqueting-hall of the castle, for they were a dark-haired race and seemed to have married dark-haired women. Philip had chestnut hair, dreamy hazel eyes and a fair skin that flushed easily when he was ill or tired. He was cleverer than Sandra and more thoughtful: and though he was five years younger he troubled more than she did about the future and about their want of education.

"Where is our father?" he said one day to Malwina.

"The Prince is in Berlin," said she.

"Why are we not with him?"

"Because you are here," said Malwina curtly. The children knew that nothing made her so cross as questions about their parents, so they had learned not to ask them. But to-day Philip persisted. It was a bitter cold March day, and they were all three sitting close to a stove in which a fire of peat and logs was burning comfortably.

"I have never seen my father," said Philip. "Surely that is strange. How can a man have a son and take no interest in him?"

"You were a baby in the cradle when the Prince left Ora," said Malwina. "Eleven years ago he left."

"I remember him," said Sandra.

"What you remember is of no use to me," said Philip. "It is not inside me. You say that he was big and dark and that you were afraid of him, but what does that tell me? Why does he never come home?"

"The Prince is his own master. He can do as he pleases," said Malwina.

"In that case there is no doubt that he is a bad father," said Philip.

"I take no interest in him," said Sandra. "I remember him as a most disagreeable man."

"Silence!" cried Malwina. "What unnatural children! Where have you learned such wickedness?"

"From our father," said Philip. "Evidently he does not care for us. Why, then, should we care for him?"

"Children must love and honour their parents," said Malwina. "They are commanded to do so. Parents are not commanded to love their children."

"Because the Almighty thought it was unnecessary," said Sandra. "Even Mutzi loves her kittens."

"A father is not a mother," said Malwina sententiously. "A mother must love her child, but men are uncertain. Besides, who says that the Prince does not love you? He sends money every month and allows you to live in the castle."

"We are not receiving a proper education," said Philip.

"Has not his Reverence taught you both every other day—year in, year out? Can you wish to know more than he knows? What talk is this? I believe you have fever again, Philip."

"We have no friends," said the boy.

Malwina knitted furiously and did not speak. She knew that Philip was right, but she did not know how to mend matters. She could hardly write or read herself, and had never been in correspondence with Prince Vavarin. Father Milias had written to him more than once about the education of his children, but had never received an answer. Except for the monthly sum of money sent through a bank in Rudnò, he did not recognise their existence. Sandra, through

the life she had led, was a child still, much younger than her seventeen years. Until lately she had taken the strange circumstances of their life for granted, happy in the forest and happy in Philip's companionship. But the boy's thoughts were busy with the future, and he had stirred his sister's discontent by displaying his own. They were growing up like savages, he said, and would not be able to occupy the place in the world prepared for them by their forefathers.

"What is it that you want?" said Sandra.

"I should be at school. After school I should go to a University and then into the army. I shall be Prince Vavarin. How can I learn to serve my country here?"

"But then we should not be together?"

"We should meet when I had leave."

"We are happier as we are."

"Happiness is not all," said Philip. "There is a kind of happiness that is ignoble."

"Are we ignoble then?"

"If we are it is not our doing. We wish for a different life."

"I don't."

"That is because you are as ignorant as a peasant. At your age you should know how to speak several languages, you should be able to sing and play the piano. You should wear beautiful clothes and be at court with the Duke and Duchess. In a year you will be old enough to marry."

"But where do you get these ideas?" cried Sandra. "They never come to me."

"You never read," Philip reminded her. And this was true: the printed page held no lures yet for Sandra, who even gathered her fairy tales at second hand. Philip, on the contrary, read everything he could get hold of; and there were some books in the castle, chiefly complete editions of standard authors.

Amongst these he found a translation of the Waverley Novels, and from them he got his ideas of life in courts and castles: a life of colour and movement that contrasted depressingly with the seclusion of Ora. He knew that he was heir to a great name and a great fortune; and yet, through his father's neglect, he was not being trained for his responsibilities or even allowed to mix with any one of his own class. He had lately made up his mind that he would write to Berlin himself and ask for the education it was high time to have; but Malwina did not know Prince Vavarin's address, so the boy was waiting to indite his letter till he knew where to send it. He expected Father Milias could help him, but the priest was from home just now and the children were having a holiday.

The afternoon was drawing to a close, and a snow-storm was sweeping past the windows, when the three people, warm and snug indoors, were startled by the front door bell. No one ever came to the front door of the castle except the postman and the priest: and this was not their day or their hour.

"It must be the devil," said Sandra, whose head was full of legends in which the devil fetched people suddenly and unexpectedly away.

"It may be our father," said Philip. "At last, perhaps, he has come to see us."

Malwina had put down her knitting and was stumping across the room, but before she could reach the door there was another peal louder and longer than the last. She hurried as fast as she could across the great flagged hall, bitter cold to-day and desolate. Both the children were at her heels and she did not turn them back. The heavy key turned slowly in the lock, the hall door fell back, and a man on horse-back stared at the old woman and at the boy and girl close behind her. He wore a German infantry uniform, he had an upturned black moustache, and

beneath it the deep lines on either side of his coarse mouth gave his face brutality. He was clumsy of figure, but looked as strong as a boar, and he had hard, beady eyes that seemed to deride the children as they stood before him.

"Prince Alexis!" Malwina had muttered under her breath: and turning to Sandra she whispered affrightedly: "Thy uncle—Prince Alexis!"

"What peasant's brood is this?" said the newcomer in a harsh voice. "Are they your children?"

"No! No!" cried Malwina. "They are the children of my gracious master. They are your nephew and niece."

The man swung himself easily from his horse, tied it to an iron ring near the door and then clattered into the hall. He was so big, and looked so fierce and unfriendly, that the old woman and the children kept close to each other and retreated before him. But he came close up to them, put his hand under Sandra's chin and looked her over from head to foot. She shrank from his eyes and from his touch, for there was no kindliness in either.

"You are the image of her," he said, and let her go. Then he turned to the boy.

"You are the image of him," he snarled: and in his manner there was a withering contempt that the children could not interpret. But they both felt angry and uncomfortable.

"Are there men in the stables?" he said next, addressing Malwina.

"There is only the gardener," said Malwina. "My gracious master sent every one away but him and me: except, of course, the woodmen. But they are not within call."

"You can come with me," said Alexis to Philip. "I must see to my horse. Have you corn?"

"There is a little that we keep for the chickens," said Malwina.

"You get my room ready," he hectored; "I shall stay here to-night. What have you to eat?"

"Fortunately I have a chicken——" began Malwina, when Sandra, offended by the man's manner and remembering her years, interposed.

"You have not told us who you are yet or why you have come," she began, but a bayonet thrust could hardly have driven her off more savagely than the man's voice and manner did as he turned on her.

"I'm Alexis Vavarin, your uncle," he said. "I've come because I chose to, and I shall stay as long as it pleases me. Go into the kitchen with this old hag and get my supper ready."

"Does my father know that you are here?" said Philip: and drew the hostile fire of the man's glance on himself.

"Who is your father?" he was asked contemptuously.

"My father is Prince Vavarin," said Philip.

"You are no Vavarin," jeered the man. "There has never been a Vavarin yet who looked like you."

CHAPTER II

MALWINA muttered to herself as she went back through the hall towards the kitchens of the castle, but Sandra, who kept close to her, could only hear something about an unplucked chicken and nothing about their visitor. She was too young and inexperienced to guess at the trouble he brought and at the serious reasons for Malwina's perturbation. The old servant knew Prince Alexis, she feared and distrusted him, she was not ready for him and she was alone. She could not confide in the children, and she could not make use of them. She was one of those people who find it easier to work themselves than to teach others, and she had not brought up Sandra to perform any household tasks. Her first idea this afternoon was to get rid of the girl.

"Go and put on your Sunday frock," she said. "Your uncle did not know you were a young lady. I am not surprised. I suppose you have been climbing trees again."

"My uncle could not guess that unless he is a wizard."

"He could see the stains on your blouse, child, clean this morning; stains of wet moss that give much trouble when I have to wash them."

"Are you sure he is my uncle? He looks very old."

"He is not more than forty. What questions will you ask next? Am I sure that he is your uncle? Was he not here for weeks together when you were a little child? Have you no memory of him then?"

"I remember a young man I called Uncle Alexis. He was thin."

"In eleven years a thin man may become stout."

"I hated him."

"He is as the Almighty made him. I cannot love a toad, but no doubt there is a reason for toads."

"He is more like a pig. He has a thick body and small crafty eyes. Why has he come?"

"I know no more than you why he has come. I have no time now for talking. I cannot give the Prince curds and roast apples for supper. I must make more fire. I must cook soup and fish and chicken and an omelette. I must lay the table with silver. I must prepare his room and put fire in the stove. He may even call for a bath. These high folk never consider that what they want makes work for the like of me. I shall go crazy, Alexandra, if you don't get out of my way."

Sandra slipped from the kitchen table on which she had perched herself.

"Never before have you addressed me as Alexandra," she observed. "I have sometimes thought that as I am no longer a child——"

"Out of my kitchen!" interrupted Malwina: but Sandra did not stir.

"Can't I help you?" she said. "I might peel potatoes."

"And stain your hands for the Prince to see! Has he not called you a peasant, the child of a peasant like me? Although he might have seen that you were of your mother's race. But he always had a tongue that would wound if it could, and hands that would strike. Why are you not gone?"

"Because I want to know more about my uncle. Why do you hate him?"

"I hate the Prince! You talk like a child. It is not my place to hate the brother of my gracious master. I have to cook his dinner and make his

bed. May his bones ache in it! May he die as she did——"

The old woman was kneeling before the stove now, coaxing the fire to burn up. Her voice alternated oddly between the official indifference with which she spoke of Prince Alexis to Sandra and the vindictive muttering the girl was allowed, though not supposed to hear.

"Why has he come?" Sandra said again.

Malwina did not answer. Her brows were bent and her hands busy. She lighted a candle and went down to the cellar in which she kept food. She came back with two fine trout bought that morning, an unplucked chicken, a fresh pound of butter and a bowl of eggs. A dour silence had fallen upon her, and Sandra recognising it went back to the hall, where she met her uncle and Philip just returned from the stables. The moment she saw her brother she knew that something unusual had happened to disturb him. His face was flushed and his eyes looked angry and miserable.

"Have you no fire anywhere?" said Alexis. "Do you herd in the kitchen with the cook?"

"We are never in the kitchen," said Sandra. "This is the room we use."

As she spoke she opened the door of the sitting-room in which they mostly lived. It was plainly furnished, but it had four windows that let in wide views of the forest and the hills. Malwina's knitting lay where she had left it when the bell rang. There was a small bookcase full of books, and on the window-sills some pots of tulips and hyacinths. Outside the landscape looked wintry, but in here the air was warm and scented with the wood fire and the flowers.

Alexis walked to a window and looked out. Then he turned to the brother and sister, who stood together watching him.

"Can you read and write?" he said.

"We have lessons three times a week from Father Milias, the priest of Ora," said Sandra. "He has taught us what he can, but we know that we are not well educated."

"I want to go to school before it is too late," said Philip.

"I want to learn singing and dancing and French," said Sandra. "Father Milias knows a little Latin, but he knows no French."

"How old are you?"

"I shall be seventeen next month."

"You don't look it."

Sandra made no reply. The man's manner was so brutal that it dazed the children, who were not used to anything except the gentle pedagogics of Father Milias and the affectionate grumblings of Malwina. When their uncle strolled restlessly up to the window again they crept closer to the stove and whispered to each other.

"What did he do to you?" murmured Sandra.

"Nothing," said Philip, but his sister saw that pain and mortification were still making it hard for him to keep his self-control. She looked closer and saw on the back of his neck, just above his collar, a red weal, left, she guessed at once, by a riding-whip.

"He struck you!" she cried in a fury, and made no attempt to lower her voice. Alexis turned sharply round and came towards them.

"You struck him!" Sandra said again, her whole body tense with challenge.

"By your leave," said her uncle derisively.

"He has never been struck by any one."

"You have both been neglected. But in future I shall have something to do with your education."

"What did he do?"

"He wasn't quick enough to please me. With the help of the whip I've taught him to unsaddle a horse. He's a milksop at present."

"He is not," cried Sandra. "How dare you come here and bully us like this? Does my father know that you have come?"

"Your father!"

Alexis chuckled to himself, made no further reply, and turned his back on the children. He went up to the bookcase at the further end of the room, looked at the contents and then took up a painted miniature portrait of Prince Vavarin that stood on the top. This he examined and put in his pocket. The children, watching him, exchanged glances and Sandra went a little nearer their formidable guest.

"That is my father's portrait," she ventured, for she had the courage of her breed in her veins, and it was called forth by a wrong.

"So I see," said Alexis.

"Its place is on the bookcase."

He turned on her with a scowl that darkened his whole face and said in a hectoring tone—

"Its place is where I choose to put it."

She thought he meant to strike her as he had struck Philip, with the riding-whip, still in his hand, yet though she retreated she went on with her protest.

"My father will expect to find it here when he comes home," she said.

"Do you expect him shortly?" said Alexis, and again there was the brutal jeer in his voice that chilled and frightened the children.

"He may come," said Philip. "To-morrow I shall write to him."

Before any one spoke Malwina came into the room and began to set the table for supper. She did not set it well, for she knew nothing of such work: but she had brought out silver the children had never seen. Alexis took up a soup ladle, tarnished for want of cleaning, but having on it the family crest.

"Did my brother lock nothing up before he left?" he asked. "Has all the silver been in your charge?"

"It is as the gracious master left it," said Malwina.

"Was there no inventory?"

"I have never seen one."

"I shall want one made."

Malwina did not look as if she understood what Alexis wanted.

"The key of the cellar I have never had," she said. "Will your lordship be pleased to take coffee? I can give you neither wine nor beer."

"I have my brother's keys," said Alexis.

Malwina looked up in surprise. She was a short, stout, elderly woman with a face in which there was steadfast kindness but not much mental activity. Her interests and her affections had been bound up for more than eleven years with the children left entirely to her care, and she had done her utmost for them. But she knew, though she would not own it, that what she had done was inadequate and that they had suffered by their father's neglect of them. Nevertheless they had been happy, hardly guessing what they missed, taking for-granted what they enjoyed. Now, for the first time, their peace was threatened. Alexis had come there in a mood that made itself felt like bad weather. He had stirred the children to a passion of anger and dislike that they had never known before. Malwina saw it in their flushed faces and in the way they stood there together listening and observant.

"Is the Prince quite well?" she asked in a voice that trembled a little.

"I hope he is in Heaven," said Alexis; and the jeer in his voice ended in a laugh at Malwina's shriek. The children crept a little nearer and Sandra put her arm round the boy now. But they were both silent, and this seemed to anger their uncle.

"Do you hear?" he said. "Your father is dead. Haven't you a tear for him?"

"When did he die?" said Sandra. There were

no tears in her eyes, but she looked white and shocked.

"Last week in Berlin."

"Were you there?"

"I was."

"What was the matter with him?"

"A bullet through his heart. He fought a duel and got the worst of it."

A shiver went through the children. The news was terrible, and their uncle's way of conveying it seemed to leave them naked to their enemies. Never until this moment had they known how friendless they were.

"Did he send us no message?" said Philip.

Alexis treated the boy and the girl quite differently. His manner to Sandra was bullying and familiar; but he thrust Philip from him with unconcealed aversion and contempt.

"Why should he send you a message?" he asked.

"We are his children."

"Are you? Has he ever recognised you as his child?"

"I live here," said Philip, wincing at the man's innuendo; "I bear the name of Vavarin."

Sandra detached herself from the boy and took a step forward, standing between him and his uncle. Her gallant carriage and her imperious air were as striking as her beauty.

"If my father is dead my brother is now Prince Vavarin," she said.

"In law he is," said Alexis, making a mock obeisance to the boy. "In law he is the head of the family. Nephew, I kiss your hand."

"We shall never see him now," said Philip to his sister.

"You would never have seen him if he had lived to be a hundred," interposed Alexis.

"Why do you say that?" asked Sandra.

"Because I knew my brother's mind. You were both as completely out of his life as if you had been dead."

The sense of loneliness that had afflicted the children since this man's arrival, as it had never afflicted them before, was deepened by the brutal roughness of this revelation.

"What had we done that he should cast us from him?" said Philip.

His uncle laughed mirthlessly.

"The sins of the mothers are visited upon the children," he answered.

"My lord," cried Malwina, no longer able to contain herself, "I have brought them up in the fear of God. I have taught them to honour their father and their mother as they are commanded in the Holy Writ."

"We shall continue to honour them," said Sandra calmly. "My father may have had reasons we cannot understand for staying away from us. This afternoon I spoke disrespectfully of him and now I am sorry for it. He is dead and cannot defend himself against calumny. We will leave him in peace."

"So you spoke disrespectfully of him this afternoon, did you?" said Alexis, eyeing Sandra. "What did you say?"

"I should think it a sin to repeat it," said Sandra. "One must honour the dead."

"What will happen to us now?" said Philip. "Shall we stay on here?"

"For the present you will," said his uncle.

"Philip is now Prince Vavarin," said Sandra. "Does that mean that the castle and the forest belong to him?"

"They belong to his guardian in trust for him till he is twenty-one. For nine years your brother is in the power of his guardian. For four years you are."

"Who are our guardians?" said Sandra, her heart sinking with ominous presage.

"Your father's will was made when he married. It appoints as guardian to his children, if he has any, their mother."

"She is dead."

"She is dead, and when she died no one was appointed in her place. The will stands as it was made eighteen years ago. You have one guardian only."

His look, his smile, his gesture as he touched his breast were all significant. The children turned from him desolately.

"Fatherless! Motherless!" sobbed Malwina, her apron to her eyes.

"Get my dinner, woman, and if you must howl, howl outside," shouted Alexis. "What was your master to you that you should weep for him?"

"It is for the children I weep," said Malwina, muttering to herself as she stumped across the room towards the door. "Who shall deliver them from the power of the wicked!"

CHAPTER III

THE Vavarins were an ancient and important family, but not a moneyed one. Prince Vavarin had married an heiress and left a large fortune. But Alexis lived from hand to mouth, always in debt and always on the look-out for money. Many years ago he had been the central figure in an unsavoury scandal that had been more or less hushed up. His own regiment wanted him no longer, but for his brother's sake, Boris, the old Duke of Katavia, managed to smuggle him across the frontier, and once there he entered the German army and became a German subject. Lately he had been detached from his regiment and had lived in Berlin. Sometimes he left Berlin and travelled in civil clothes to London. He spoke English fluently, but with a foreign accent; and he hated England venomously. When the Hereditary Prince of Katavia married an English girl who was not of royal birth Alexis said in Berlin that there would be a revolution in Katavia: and that if the court of Berlin refused to countenance the marriage the other courts of Europe would follow suit. But what Alexis said in Berlin or anywhere else was no great matter. The courts of Europe behaved much as ordinary people do when they hear of a *mésalliance*. Some were stiff and unfriendly and some were not. The marriage was celebrated with pomp in the cathedral of Rudno, and two years later, in July 1914, Torquil and Patricia his wife were to be crowned there. Two boys had been born of the marriage, Patricia was admired and beloved wherever she went; and her

vast fortune, wisely administered, was used in her husband's country to further social legislation and encourage Science and Art.

In the spring of 1913 Alexis Vavarin had arrived in Berlin after one of his long absences, and said that he had been travelling in England on official business. His contempt for English slackness and English gullibility could hardly be expressed in words. Guttural snarls, loud laughter, and the use of his clenched fists were all needed to show Berlin what he thought of the miserable island kingdom.

"A nation of grocers!" he would exclaim. "They live in a fool's paradise, I tell you. For them the awakening is near. Their army is rotten. They are rotten. While they are at their games and their picnics we shall land one Army Corps. One Army Corps, I tell you, and they will be finished. I know them. I spit upon them. They are not worth the bones of one German grenadier. Perhaps two good Uhlans will take the country as they took Nancy in 1870. They are cowards, like the Belgians and the French."

"They have many great colonies and many ships," some one would exclaim.

"So much the better for us. We shall seize them—without a blow. India, Australia, South Africa! They are all waiting for the Day that will bring them German Culture and German Rule."

These sentiments and prophecies were received with general approval. Alexis was not liked or trusted, but he was the mouthpiece of popular ideas. The boarding-house in which he stayed was in the neighbourhood of the Dorotheenstrasse and no one would have guessed at its character from its dull, respectable outside. A Frau Preussker ran it, and though the police were sometimes curious about her guests they rarely interfered with them. People of all nationalities ate at the long, narrow dining-table

mutually distrustful. The proprietress was a big, full-figured woman of middle age, with an ingratiating manner, a hard mouth, and an impudent tongue. She belonged to a world that is socially submerged, but pretends that it is not. So did some of her guests, more especially those who were English. Amongst these people Alexis Vavarin shone as a man of noble birth, who had a brother placed at Court, who had never been afraid of the police, and who had money at his command. He and a Dr. and Mrs. Smithson formed a superior trio in the house, and soon after he got back to Berlin they were on friendly terms with each other. His fulminations against England did not hinder this, partly because the Smithsons knew enough to take them at their real worth, and partly because they were not people with any stake in their own country or any affection for it. They said that they had been in the Argentine for two years, and before that in other parts of South America. What they said was accepted. At Frau Preussker's table it was understood that questions were certainly unwelcome and statements probably untrue. Her guests had their own secrets and their own affairs. They were curious about each other, often vulgarly curious: they gossiped about each other, and their gossip was malevolent: but they could not object to any one suspect in their midst because they were all more or less in the shade themselves. Dr. and Mrs. Smithson were well dressed and they paid their bills. They mixed as little as possible with their fellow-boarders, and gave no reasons for being in Berlin. They might have been ordinary tourists come to the capital to see the sights and alighted in Frau Preussker's flat by accident.

"How did you hear of this Pension?" some one asked Mrs. Smithson soon after she came.

"An acquaintance in an hotel at Buenos Ayres told us of it," she said.

"Do you propose to make a long stay in Berlin?"

"We have no plans."

"It is the most magnificent city in the world," said another person at the table. "Paris and London cannot compare with it."

"*Quatsch!*" said Alexis, and that was the beginning of his intimacy with the Smithsons. When he said "*Quatsch!*" the discussion was ended, because he was the bully of that company and every one was afraid of him.

"Has any one seen an evening paper?" he went on.

"I looked at one in a café," said Dr. Smithson, who spoke some German.

"Is the Duke of Katavia dead yet?"

"I did not notice. Where is Katavia, and who is its Duke?"

"Katavia is near the frontier of Züringen. Its capital is Rudno. The old Duke Boris is dying. When he is dead Torquil and his Englishwoman will reign there."

"His Englishwoman?" said Mrs. Smithson on an interrogative note.

"He married an Englishwoman of no birth—if you can call it a marriage."

Meanwhile some one else at the table had taken a paper from his pocket and handed it to Alexis.

"Boris is dead," he announced, after looking at it. "Then Torquil is Duke!"

"How came he to marry an Englishwoman?" said Mrs. Smithson idly. She had curious narrow eyes that nearly closed when she became watchful or angry, and her lips were thin but vividly red.

"He met her abroad and married her for her money," said Alexis. "He did for himself in the highest quarters. Berlin has never recognised the marriage."

"Has the Englishwoman children, and are they legitimate?" asked Mrs. Smithson.

"She has two children, and they are legitimate," said Alexis, scowling. "There is no Royal Marriage Act in Katavia. It is an independent state, and when the Day comes they may be neutral, or may fight against us. In that case the nation would be wiped out."

"I suppose you expect to wipe out all your enemies?" said Dr. Smithson.

"We don't expect. We know," replied Alexis.

"Well—I wish you good luck!" said the doctor. "I'm not a patriot. It doesn't matter to me whether the Prussians or the English are in London. The world is my home and Berlin suits me at present."

"But you and Mrs. Smithson are English," said Alexis suspiciously.

"We are anything you please," said the doctor, and there for the moment the conversation ended. But all through that year these three people saw a great deal of each other, and after a time became very intimate. Alexis was away occasionally, but even to the Smithsons he never said a word of what his business had been. He spent a great deal more than his uniform brought him, and yet whenever his tongue was loosed by wine he would discourse of his brother's riches and his own poverty. The Smithsons knew that his brother was Prince Vavarin, a man of wealth and standing, who hardly acknowledged Alexis's existence, and in time they pieced together the story that had made orphans of the children of Ora.

"He could have divorced her, but he preferred that she should die," Alexis said. "He and I were together that night. He forgets now that I was with him. We saw her die."

"Did you kill her?" said Mrs. Smithson with cold curiosity.

"We should have done. With the help of God we should have done. We had unsheathed our swords."

"I should have thought two men could kill one woman without the help of God," said Mrs. Smithson.

"We pursued her. She ran like a hare and threw herself from a high cliff into the river."

"Your brother could not disown the boy?" asked the doctor.

"He would not in my favour," said Alexis gloomily. "That is why we quarrelled. We have not been on speaking terms for years."

Sitting there in Frau Preussker's salon, not quite sober, not over clean, boastful and coarse-tongued, he didn't look like a man who had ever belonged to a great family or could ever again rise to the surface. He had his uniform, it is true, but even in Berlin it did not carry him far. Amongst his brother officers his name was blown upon; amongst his equals in birth he was not received. By slow degrees the Smithsons wormed themselves into his confidence, but he never received theirs in exchange. It was always Alexis who talked and they who listened and sympathised. Certainly his was a hard case: but who ever knows what would happen? If anything removed the boy, Alexis would inherit his brother's title and all his land.

"Even then I suppose the mother's money would go to the girl," said Mrs. Smithson.

"I suppose so," said Alexis; and as if he were giving tongue to an old thought he added: "In Katania, as in Germany, an uncle may marry his niece. It is commonly done."

"I suppose I shall shock you," said the doctor, "but I hold that we attach too much value to human life."

He was a smooth-faced, smooth-voiced man in the early forties, with a heavy jowl and shifty brown eyes. In argument he tried bluster where he could intimidate, and wheedling persuasion where he could not. Often he sat through a meal silent and savagely

out of humour. At first people had pitied his wife, but when they had watched the couple for some time they saw that even with such a mate she could hold her own. Her thin, wide mouth shut like a trap if she was angry, and then her heavy lids nearly covered her long eyes. This often happened when the doctor began to bluster, and sometimes he would stop in the midst of what he was saying as if her derisive mask gave him pause. In spite of his cruel jaw he was the weaker of the two, for he had neither her iron will nor her power of silence. However, when he said he attached little value to human life she encouraged him with a glance and he went on—

"Nature holds life cheap. You see it throughout the universe. So do we when it comes in our way. We destroy vermin: we kill most of our food: men enjoy killing, in sport or in battle."

"Yes," said Alexis. "In sport or in battle, but not otherwise."

"Sometimes," said the doctor very softly. "Sometimes it is necessary otherwise."

He let the idea sink in for a little while, and then spoke again in a genial, half-bantering tone.

"It's so easy," he said; "it's so absurdly easy."

"It may be easy to do," said Alexis, "but it is not easy to avoid discovery."

"It depends upon circumstances," said the doctor; and then, for the time being, changed the subject.

It was some days later when Alexis, talking as usual of his grievances, told the Smithsons that if his brother died he would be sole guardian of his nephew and niece.

"Unless your brother has made a new will," said Mrs. Smithson.

"Why should he have made a new will? He expects to live and not to die. He never sees these children."

"Do you know them?"

"I saw the girl when she was six and the boy when he was a year old. I have never been at Ora since then. My brother and I are not good friends."

"Then he has probably made a new will," said Mrs. Smithson.

So it became a matter of habit with these three people all through the winter to talk of Alexis's family affairs and of the two lives standing between his present discontent and brilliant good fortune. The Smithsons both fanned his natural inclination to consider them obstacles annoyingly in his way; and when one day a telegram came summoning him to his brother's bedside none of the three disguised their excitement.

"If he dies——" said Dr. Smithson.

"He is dying," said Alexis. "The telegram says so. I may not find him alive."

"In that case the boy at Ora will inherit everything—the title, the land, the money——"

"Though, as you assure us, he has not a drop of Vavarin blood in his veins."

"Not a drop. I swear it," said Alexis.

"There is such a thing as taking the law into one's own hands," said Dr. Smithson. "Sometimes it is necessary."

"That is easier in a savage land than in a civilised one," said Alexis. "Here you have to be careful."

"Everything depends upon your brother's will," said Mrs. Smithson.

CHAPTER IV

ALEXIS was away for a fortnight, and during that time he did not write to any one at the boarding-house. He sent the Smithsons a telegram, and then a printed form, announcing his brother's death: and the form bore a fashionable address near the Thiergarten.

"He will never come back here," Dr. Smithson said gloomily. "Why should he?"

"He will come back if he wants us," said Mrs. Smithson. "He may have gone to Katavia."

Both the German and the English papers were paying more attention than usual to Katavia just now, because the Coronation of the new Duke, Torquil, was to take place in July. As his wife Patricia was not of royal blood, her place in the great ceremony was raising difficulties. The mandarins in all the courts of Europe were perturbed, and the least of them felt more perturbed than Patricia did herself. There were articles and paragraphs about her in every paper, and portraits of her and of Torquil in every shop-window, even in Berlin. She had met the Duke in romantic circumstances, when he was not the Hereditary Prince, and when he was travelling incognito as Mr. Broom, secretary to some English people called Looper. The papers did not say that she herself had been travelling with a man and woman who attempted her life more than once because, at her death, the woman would have inherited a considerable sum of money. Partly through Mr. Broom and the Loopers

they had been foiled, but they had escaped without punishment. The portraits published of Patricia were various. In one she had an infant in her arms, while an older child, just able to stand, clambered close to her on the same chair. In another she was alone, a stately, beautiful young woman, wearing splendid jewels. In a third Torquil stood beside her in his Hussar uniform. All three were reproduced in an English illustrated paper that Dr. Smithson had brought in and given to his wife. They were turning over its pages together when the door opened and Alexis Vavarin, looking brisker and smarter than usual, walked into the room.

"Welcome back!" they cried effusively, and rushed to meet him.

"I've not come to stay," he said. "Thank God, I've done with this hole."

He looked round the mildewed, comfortless room with hatred, kicked aside a stool in his path, and took the chair Mrs. Smithson had just vacated, the only comfortable one in the room. The very way in which he lolled in it was insolent, every tone in his voice was aggressive, and though he sought out the Smithsons his manner to them was sour and overbearing.

"We were just saying that we feared we should never see you again," pursued Dr. Smithson. "I suppose in future you will live at Ora?"

"How can I live at Ora when my work is here?" snapped Alexis. "Talk sense!"

"In England, when a man succeeds to a fortune, he often sends in his papers," said Mrs. Smithson.

"What you do in England is no rule for what is done here. The English are a nation of grocers and golfers. They no longer count."

"That is why I have renounced my nationality," said Dr. Smithson. "I think of becoming a German."

"It isn't so easy. We don't welcome wastrels of

every nationality as you do. We are not decadent. We are the salt of the earth. I've often told you so."

"Often!" murmured Mrs. Smithson, her derisive eyes fixed meditatively on the specimen of salt addressing her.

"I have to live in Berlin," he continued. "I am keeping on my brother's house, and shall establish myself there. When I can get away I shall go to Ora, but that will not be often. Duty comes first with us."

"Have you been in Berlin ever since you left here?" asked Mrs. Smithson.

"Of course not. What do you think? I've been in Katavia, at Rudno, and at Ora."

"Did you see the new Duke and Duchess when you were at Rudno?" said Mrs. Smithson. The illustrated paper lay open on the table beside her, and her eyes rested idly on the portrait of Patricia and her children.

"I saw them several times. Why do you ask? Have you ever seen them? Have you ever been in Katavia?"

"Never!" said Dr. Smithson resolutely. "But we were just looking at an English illustrated paper."

He pushed it towards Alexis, who glanced at the portrait of Patricia and put it down again.

"She is too thin," he said contemptuously. "Your English ideas of beauty do not pass with us. But I have not come here to talk twaddle about royalties. That also we leave to your tea-tables. I have other things to think about. Can you dine with me to-night at Kempinski's? We can't talk here."

"We can and will," said Dr. Smithson genially. "My dear Prince, we are both delighted to see you again."

The dear Prince only answered with a grunt, and turned his attention to his orderly, who, after knock-

ing at the door, had been commanded to come in. The boy saluted and asked his master for his keys.

"I gave them to you," Alexis said roughly.

The boy, who looked the image of fear, saluted again and said nothing, but stood there waiting.

"*Heraus*," shouted Alexis. "Get your packing done, fool!"

"But everything is locked," stammered the boy.

"Unlock it! You have the keys."

"If the Herr Major would graciously look in his pocket——"

"*Saukerl!* Do you dare to contradict me?"

Before the Smithsons guessed what he was going to do, Alexis had risen to his feet and dealt the boy a resounding blow on the side of his head that sent him stumbling backwards towards the door. He did not say a word or utter a groan, but with a dazed face tried to escape from the room. As he reached the open door Alexis found his keys and flung them across the room at the boy. They caught him sharply on the back of his head and fell to the ground. He had to turn to pick them up, and Mrs. Smithson saw the dumb, helpless hate in his eyes as he did so.

"We keep the swine in order," said Alexis, when the door had shut on his man. "We stand no nonsense. We are not *mosch*, as you are!"

"What does *mosch* mean?" asked Mrs. Smithson.

"Worn out, decadent, soft."

"Even amongst us there are exceptions," said Dr. Smithson. "I've led a rough life lately and I'm up to a rough job."

"Are you?" said Alexis attentively.

"I don't mind telling you that I want a job. I'm here to find one."

"Why don't you get one in your own country?"

"That's my affair. I've a fancy for your country just at present, and I don't see why the Secret Service shouldn't employ me."

"You want to be a spy: a paid spy?"

"Secret Service sounds better."

"You're English. Our people would never trust you. Not such fools!"

"They might try me. Just because we are English we could be useful. No one would suspect us."

"I've a job for you myself," said Alexis suddenly. "When that's done we can talk about the other. If you satisfy me I might be able to help you."

He stalked out of the room without waiting for an answer: and when he had gone the husband and wife looked at each other.

"He's on," said Dr. Smithson.

"Mind you make good terms," said his wife. "And don't run risks."

"There are always risks."

"Of course you'll say so—to him."

"I wonder what he wants."

"He wants to be Prince Vavarin and a rich man. He has made that plain enough—stupid bully!"

An hour later the Smithsons met Alexis at Kempinski's, the big popular restaurant in the Friedrichstrasse, and they found that he had secured a table for three in a quiet corner where they could talk undisturbed. People who do not know Berlin need not think that because the restaurant was inexpensive and popular it was flamboyant in decoration, noisy and badly served. The colouring of the walls was quiet, the curtains were a soft green, the table linen spotless, and the glass shapely and slim. The menu offered was long and various, and Alexis ordered a choice of appetising dishes from it. He also ordered a magnum of champagne. This expenditure was so unlike anything he had permitted himself since the Smithsons had known him, that they felt sure his brother's death must have filled his purse already.

"We drink to you," said Dr. Smithson, lifting his

glass, but though his host lifted his own and bowed in response he did it sourly.

"We are longing to hear your news," said Mrs. Smithson.

"I see you are," sneered Alexis. "You want to know where you come in and why we are dining together to-night."

"I told you we wanted a job. You said you had one for us," said Dr. Smithson. "It is all quite open and above-board——"

"*Quatsch!*" said Alexis.

"What exactly does *Quatsch* mean?" said Mrs. Smithson. Her voice was chilly with anger, and she looked at the boor who was entertaining her as if she would gladly have thrown the wine she held to her lips at his ill-tempered face.

"It means stuff and nonsense. What I want is not open and above-board. I shall not even put it into words. If you understand what I want and manage it for me I'll pay you. That's all I have to say. I'm not going to prepare a trap for myself. I'm not such a fool."

"You have been telling us all the winter what you want," said Mrs. Smithson. "There can be no mistake about that. The interesting point is how are you going to get it?"

"When I see what I want ahead of me I hack my way through," said Alexis brutally. "Necessity knows no law."

"Blood and iron," said Dr. Smithson. "They take a man and they take a nation far."

"You see where we stand to-day. The world trembles at our nod. Before long it will be ground under our heel."

"But meanwhile, you don't find your pay enough for your needs," interposed Mrs. Smithson, her level, acid voice acting like an extinguisher on the man's boasting. "You want your brother's money even

if, as you say, you have to hack your way through to get it."

"What I want is morally mine. My brother never had a son. I am Prince Vavarin."

"You haven't told us much yet," Dr. Smithson reminded him. "Had your brother made a new will?"

"He had not."

"Then, although your brother disowned the boy he did not disinherit him?"

"My brother was in the prime of life. He would probably have married again. I suppose he never thought of his death or his will."

"Well," said Dr. Smithson meditatively, "if your brother had lived and married again you'd have had less of a chance than you have now. This boy—anything might happen to him."

"He looks consumptive," said Alexis.

"You have seen the two children?" said Mrs. Smithson.

"Didn't I tell you I'd been to Ora?"

"Who takes care of them?"

"An old peasant woman. They've run wild. They've had no schooling, they've no friends. I doubt if any one, except peasants, remembers their existence."

"Peasants have tongues," said Mrs. Smithson.

"Peasants have no medical knowledge," said her husband, who had been listening attentively. "They would not know whether the right treatment was being tried—or the right drugs."

"You don't always agree about it yourselves," said Mrs. Smithson.

"We make experiments," said the doctor. "We do our best; but how often we fail!"

"What's your price?" said Alexis.

There had never been any friendship between him and the Smithsons, although they had been a great

deal together for months. Alexis had always treated the doctor and his wife arrogantly, and shown them that in his opinion they were not his equals. He consorted with them, but he distrusted them: and because he meant to use them he hated them both. The doctor's shifty eyes had glanced at his wife and away again, when the question of price brought the discussion to a climax.

"You can't expect to hack your way through without paying for it," said Mrs. Smithson.

"Can you put your hand on money already?" said her husband.

"That's my affair," said Alexis. "How much do you want?"

"Five thousand pounds," said Mrs. Smithson.

Alexis pushed back his chair with considerable force, threw a fifty-mark note on the table and got up.

"*Mahlzeit!*" he said. "I'm going."

The doctor got up too, quietly but as quickly and cleverly as a cat. He intercepted his host and spoke to him with silken courtesy.

"Men settle their business matters with each other," he said. "Tell us what your ideas are, and afterwards, we will have a smoke by ourselves."

"I've no time to waste," said Alexis, but a word or two more mollified him, and he sat down again. A waiter brought coffee and cigars and then the bill, which the Prince paid with the note he had thrown on the table.

"Let us understand what you want before we bargain about the cost," said Dr. Smithson. "Your brother's children are at Ora at present. The girl is nearly grown up and the boy—how old is the boy?"

"Twelve."

"And you consider him delicate?"

"Yes."

"Therefore, on account of his health you wish to place him under medical care?"

"Yes."

Alexis was not looking at either of the Smithsons now. His eyes were fixed sullenly on some distant point of the large, crowded room, and his answers were growling and almost inarticulate.

"We should have to live at Ora," put in Mrs. Smithson.

"No," said Alexis. "The old woman is there and a priest who might be officious. You must have them to yourselves."

"That goes without saying," purred the doctor. "We must have them to ourselves—quite to ourselves. But how is it to be managed?"

"There is a small house on an island on the Ruda that you can have. It isn't cheerful or luxurious, but I suppose you wouldn't want it long."

"I can't say," replied the doctor, and then with a sudden change of manner he added: "To tell the truth I don't like the job. There's danger in it!"

Alexis, with an exclamation of annoyance, looked at Mrs. Smithson to see if she agreed with her husband, but her expression was as blank as a stone.

"We should be conspicuous," said Dr. Smithson; "the countryside would watch and gossip. If you want to advertise what you are doing bury yourself in the country. If you want to hide it stay in Berlin."

"Are there servants in the house?" said Mrs. Smithson.

"No," said Alexis. "It has stood empty for years."

"How should we get food?"

"At an inn on shore—or you carry supplies to the island in your boat."

"I've no fancy for Katavia," said Mrs. Smithson, "your Duchess is English and might hear of us——"

"The Duchess is always at Avlona or Rudno. The house on the island is in the nethermost corner

of the duchy, close to the frontier. Besides—royalties don't hear of sewer-rats——"

The last remark was not audibly addressed to his guests, but was murmured as an aside.

"They might hear of your nephew and niece," said Mrs. Smithson. "I suppose the present Prince Vavarin is not a rat. He may have powerful friends."

"Not one. Since my brother left Ora, eleven years ago, not a soul has entered his house or visited his children. They have no near neighbours and distant ones have forgotten their existence."

"You spoke of a priest?"

"A priest and a peasant. They are of no account. They won't go with you to the island."

"I must think it over," said Dr. Smithson. "It might be managed safely and successfully, but we must be careful. And when it comes to bargaining I should certainly require an advance—a substantial one."

"We will talk over that when we smoke our second cigar," said Alexis.

CHAPTER V

At Ora life apparently went on as usual, and the children were beginning to regard their uncle's visit as a nightmare that was to have no consequences. They thought of him with dread, and, in spite of knowing that he was now their guardian, they hoped they would never see him again. He replaced the father Philip could not remember, the father who had left them at Ora year after year, so that every root of their young lives was there, and they could not imagine an existence outside their forest. When they had asked their uncle about the future he had answered in an evasive way and with jeers at their ignorance and roughness. He said they were not fit to associate with their equals in birth and would never be welcome amongst them. This rankled in the boy's memory, but the girl said she did not see that it mattered much.

"We shall always live together here," she said to him one day. "We can do without other people."

"I suppose we must while I am a minor," he said. "But when I am of age I shall go into the world and take you with me."

"The world is hard and cruel. Father Milias says so," quoted Sandra.

"I cannot believe that altogether," said Philip. "At any rate I should like to judge for myself."

"We are very happy here. Why should you want a change?"

"I shall not always be a boy, Sandra. A man has work to do and should be trained for it. That is what troubles me. When I am a man I shall be of no account."

It was only on rare occasions that Philip allowed his discontent to reach his lips: and more often than not the hourly pleasures and affairs of life kept it out of his mind. But since he had heard of his father's death, the idea that he was not preparing for the future had gained ground. He was Prince Vavarin now, and his place in the world would bring duties as well as privileges. He did not even know at what age he ought to begin his military training, and he was sure that by this time he ought to be hard at work.

"I shall write to my uncle," he said one afternoon, at the end of May. "It is two months since he was here and nothing has been heard of him."

"We don't want him to come again," said Sandra.

"But he ought to make proper arrangements for us. I told him that I wished to go to school."

"How heartless you are, Philip, to wish to leave me."

"Perhaps you could live near the school so that we might sometimes meet."

"I could not live away from Ora."

"You would have to if you married."

"Is it likely that I shall ever marry? Who comes to Ora?"

The brother and sister had come out for a long ramble in the forest this afternoon, and their object was to gather lilies of the valley. The best ones grew amongst the lime-stone rocks, a region of running water, untended trees and an undergrowth of ferns and flowers that brought no profit to the owner of Ora, but was more beautiful than the broad acres of

well-grown timber in which the head forester took pride. The high road from Rudno to Avlona ran beside it and divided land belonging to the Duke from the forests of Ora. The children sometimes came here on purpose to watch the traffic on the road, as it was their only way of getting a peep at the outside world. They saw heavy timber-laden carts go slowly by and heard the loud exciting crack of the driver's whip: they saw peasants trudging from their farms to the village of Ora, and most of these they knew and could greet cordially. Sometimes they saw cars and carriages with well-dressed people, so that though they had no friends, they knew what the men and women of their world looked like and how they themselves fell short. For a moment, perhaps, the contrast would trouble them, but not for long. Sandra was a child still and was content with the pleasures each season offered: pleasures of the river and the forest, pleasures found especially in this wild region, where there were more birds and flowers than in the gloom of serried pines, and where in May lilies of the valley grew in great, spreading masses amongst the rocks and trees. While the lilies lasted the children liked to gather great basketsful of them: when the lilies were over the wild strawberries were ripe: and after the strawberries came bilberries that Malwina cooked in various ways and served with cream. The winter had its joys, too, at Ora, joys of snow and ice and warm indoor comfort: and of dark mysterious winter mornings, when old Peter, the poultry man, came in to light peat fires in the bedroom stoves, so that the children should be warm when they got up.

But now early summer had come to Ora, and while they gathered their lilies the sun was hot. There was a delicate mist of green all over the forest, the wild cherries were in flower and the wild hyacinth

still spread their sheen of heavenly blue on the ground. As for the lilies of the valley, their glossy leaves made a thick carpet where they grew, but their flowers were hardly come yet. However, the children filled their baskets and then wandered further and further in the direction of Avlona. They had never been there, but they had seen pictures of the old castle built on the face of the cliff and looking sheer down upon the sea.

"We are not far from our rock now," said Sandra, and turned to see why Philip lagged behind. She knew why instantly and reproached herself. He looked white and strained with fatigue.

"We'll go back," she said.

"We'll rest first and look at the road," said he.

So they clambered up the high, flat rock that had often been their seat before, and looked both ways along the empty road. But the sun shone on the rock this afternoon, and though Sandra could bear it, she soon began to think the shade would be better for Philip. He had owned to a headache.

"We'll find a place under trees," she said, and sprang briskly to her feet. She was such a healthy, ignorant young animal that though she watched over her brother she could not guess how sick and ill he felt; and she wondered at his silence. "I'll help you down," she said, but still he said nothing, and as she stood there his eyes shut and he fell forward helplessly. He had fainted.

Sandra was a good deal frightened and disturbed, but she knew what had happened. Philip had fainted once before after a long, tiring walk, and Malwina had blamed her for letting him overtax his strength. That time, however, he had reached home when he collapsed and was put straight to bed. Here, he lay, looking fast asleep and very white, on the top of a bare rock, the sun beating on his face, a two

hours' walk from help. She could not lift him down into the shade without some one to aid her, and there was no one near. She put her hands to her lips and gave three piercing shrieks in case some peasant or forester was within call: but no one came. Philip did not open his eyes or give any sign of life, although the noise she made ought to have roused him. She bent down and spoke to him, she put her arm under his shoulders and raised him, she tried to shade his head and face with her body; but to sit there quietly and watch him soon became unbearable. On the opposite side of the road, deep down beneath a rocky slope, ran a stream that she knew well, and she made up her mind to leave the boy for a few minutes and fetch some water to revive him. She had nothing with her to hold water, but she was soon scrambling amongst the rocks that led to it. She could soak a handkerchief or even her skirt, she thought, and get as much as she wanted. The great difficulty would be to help Philip down from the rock when she waked him; for it was high and could only be scaled by the sure-footed and the agile. Last time he fainted he had felt weak and ill for some hours.

"Was it you who called?" said some one just beneath her on the slope: some one she did not see yet, because she had turned to help herself further down by grasping at the rocks that made a rough, steep staircase here. She looked back at once, and saw a tall, youngish man, dark-haired, clean shaven, with features that were aquiline. He had a quiet manner and observant eyes.

"Was it you who called?" he said again, and he gave her a hand as she sprang close to the stream from the high ledge of rock on which she had been standing.

"My brother has fainted," she said.

"Where is he?"

"On the top of a rock. I am going to take some water there. But I cannot lift him down without help."

"I will help you."

Sandra looked at the stranger and he looked at her. She had knelt down beside the stream and was dipping her handkerchief in the water. He saw that it was a large coarse linen one, such as peasants use, and that her clothes were plain and countrified. She wore no hat, and the roughest of boots, but her speech was not of the class in which her raiment placed her. Nor were her manner and her carriage.

"We must be quick," she said. "The sun is hot this afternoon. We must lift him from the rock. It will not be easy."

Where she led the young man followed, and a few minutes later they were both kneeling over Philip, who still lay as his sister had left him, in a swoon. While she put her wet handkerchief on the boy's forehead the stranger felt his pulse, listened to his heart, and then, taking a flask from his pocket, tried to pour a few drops from it down his patient's throat.

"Take care!" said Sandra imperiously.

"It is only wine," said the young man. "I wish it was brandy."

"I am afraid you will choke him."

"You need not be afraid."

He bent more closely over the boy as he spoke and watched him; while Sandra uttered a cry of relief because Philip opened his eyes and looked at her placidly.

"What are you doing?" he said, and then tried to raise himself. "Who are you?" he asked of the young man bending over him; but the effort of moving and speaking seemed too much for the boy, and he lay still again.

"He will be better soon," said the stranger. "Where is your home?"

"At Ora," said Sandra.

She was so absorbed in watching Philip that she did not see the effect of her reply on the man watching with her. His interest in the two young people seemed to deepen and his slight start was one of surprise.

"Do you live in the village?" he asked.

"We live in the castle," said Sandra.

"Are you the children of Prince Vavarin?"

"Yes," said Sandra. "Our father is dead. My brother is now Prince Vavarin."

She could not know it, but the man beside her was trying to piece together half-remembered fragments of the double tragedy that had descended on the house of Vavarin many years ago. Since he had come to man's estate the name had not been spoken in his hearing, and he had not known that there was a boy living to carry it on. He knew that there had been two brothers, and that both had been driven from their country by scandal and misfortune: and a short time ago he had seen a long notice in the papers of Prince Vavarin's death in Berlin.

"Who are your guardians?" he asked.

"In March our Uncle Alexis came to see us," said Sandra. "He told us that our father was dead and that he was now our guardian."

"I have never met your uncle," said the young man. "Where does he live?"

"At present he is with his regiment in Berlin. He told us that he had become a German because the Germans are more civilised than the Katavians."

"Who is at Ora with you?"

"Malwina. There has never been any one else."

"Who is Malwina?"

"Our nurse."

"But what education are you receiving?"

"Our priest, Father Milias, comes three times a week for two hours. It isn't much."

"It is not enough for Prince Vavarin," said the young man, looking at the delicate, beautiful face of the boy, who now sat propped and shaded by his arm.

"I have always said it is not enough," Philip cried, in an eager, but a rather shaky voice. "But what can we do?"

"Our uncle told us that we were as rough and ignorant as peasants, and that we could never be received at Court or make friends amongst our equals," said Sandra. "Only this afternoon we were discussing it. For myself I do not mind. I want no friend but Philip, and I should like to live at Ora till I die. But a man wants to do his work in the world and take his rightful place."

"Certainly he does," said the stranger.

"I am going into the army," said Philip.

"You cannot go yet," said Sandra.

"I suppose your uncle is making plans for you. But by this time you should be at school, and you——" The young man looked at Sandra and smiled a little. "How old are you, Princess?" he asked.

"I am nearly seventeen," said Sandra. "I am too old to go to school and yet I know very little. I cannot dance or play the piano or speak any language but my own. Certainly I must stay at Ora all my life. Anywhere else I should feel ashamed."

"When will you see your uncle again?"

The sudden change in both the children's faces, the aversion and the terror were startling and unmistakable.

"We hope never to see him again," said Philip.

"We hope he is dead," said Sandra. "He struck

Philip with a whip. He insulted us. He stole our father's portrait. He is a boor and a bully."

"Alexis Vavarin," said the stranger meditatively, when he had recovered from his surprise at this outburst. "With his regiment at Berlin. Now what have I ever heard about Alexis Vavarin?"


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CHAPTER VI

FOR the first time in her life Sandra could not sleep at night when everyone else slept as a matter of course. She lay in bed, wide awake, while the events of the day fell into two parts, one adventurous and one distressing. The first part belonged to the life she knew and dearly loved, the life at Ora and in the forest. Philip had been ill and had alarmed her; but that belonged to life and was the little shadow sometimes across the sun. He always got well again.

The stranger who had helped them belonged to the forest too. He was the human figure who had never appeared before, and who haunted Sandra's fancy now so that she remembered the tones of his voice, the words he had spoken, and the poise of his body as he helped Philip down from the rock and sometimes carried him, sometimes carefully supported him, on the way home. When he left them the children had both tried to thank him, but they had been too shy to ask his name, and so he had disappeared as he came, a stranger to them. As they approached the castle they had talked of him but they had not been able to guess at his identity. As he felt Philip's pulse the stranger had told the children that he was a doctor, but beyond that he had said nothing of himself.

"He is very handsome," said Sandra. "He is like the Archangel Michael in the picture in our mother's room."

"He is strong," said Philip. "When he helped me down from the rock his wrists were like iron; and

though he carried me a long way he was not out of breath. I wish we could see him again!"

"So do I," said Sandra.

"Why didn't you ask his name? If he is a doctor he probably lives in Rudno. Perhaps he is a friend of Prince Sergius and is staying with him. I suppose it is not possible——"

Sandra stopped because the magnitude of her thoughts took her by surprise.

"It could not be the Prince himself," she said.

"I do not believe that princes wander about by themselves and attend to sick people," said Philip. "They are hedged round by etiquette and cannot take a step without attendants."

"How do you know? Why should you know more of such things than I do? We have neither of us ever seen a prince of the reigning house."

"But I have read of them," said Philip. "I have seen portraits of our royal family, too. Malwina has a post-card with them in a group."

"Was one of them like our doctor?"

"I cannot say. We will see if Malwina has it still, when we get home."

"I wish we had asked his name. You might go to Rudno and consult him."

"Why should I? I am quite well. Doctors cost money."

"I wonder if we are rich or poor," said Sandra.

"I believe we are rich," said Philip. "Once in speaking of our duty to our neighbours Father Milias referred to wealthy landowners, who did not know what went on behind their backs on their property; and then he got red as if he had said something wrong and he would not finish. I believe he meant our father. It is not right that we should be kept here in ignorance and darkness."

The boy spoke with unwonted passion, for the knowledge that he was now Prince Vavarin had acted like

a spark on his dormant sense of privilege and responsibility; while the accidental encounter with the unknown doctor had brought his own disadvantages home to him with wounding certainty. Sandra and he were dressed like common people and perhaps had the manners of common people as their uncle had informed them: and why they should have been so stinted and neglected he did not know.

"We must write to our uncle," he went on more calmly. "You at any rate are old enough to be told the truth about our circumstances, and I am old enough to know that we ought not to be leading this life."

"I want no other life. I know that you do," said Sandra, who had her arm round his shoulders and was helping him up the steep, roughly cut footpath leading to their home. As she lay awake at night she remembered his eager face and voice, and remembered also how tired and worn the long day had left him. At the top of the path they had been obliged to rest before they went through a shrubbery that lay between the edge of the forest and the gardens, and he had looked so white and frail that she feared he might faint again. But after a little pause they went on together, and were in the garden when they saw three people, one of them their uncle, coming towards them.

The gardens of the castle were formal and not well kept, but an old gardener, with the help of a boy, mowed the lawns, kept the terrace tidy, and in summer brought out the orange trees and palms that were his pride. The general effect, at all seasons, was dignified but stiff and clipped, and the children never lingered here. Yet this afternoon the beauty of their home struck them forcibly and unexpectedly: perhaps because their thoughts had been of leaving it; perhaps because they saw strangers there with the uncle they disliked; perhaps also because the perfect day

was drawing to its close in golden light and with an evensong of birds. They stopped still for a moment and they both wished they could run back into the friendly forest. But their uncle had seen them. He signed imperiously to them to come forward, and as they did so they heard his derisive laugh and heard his companions answer it.

The children had come straight from their little adventure in the forest, their imagination fired and their romantic fancy touched by the stranger who had helped them. If they had met an archangel he would have stood or fallen by the stranger's measure; and by this measure the three people watching their advance were wholly displeasing. The stumpy little man near their uncle had a fat, hairless face, a broad jowl, and shifty brown eyes. The woman was tall and thin, with scarlet lips and slit-like eyes. Her hair waved low and picturesquely on her temples, her nose was short with wide nostrils, and her mouth was tightly closed. These first impressions the children gathered as they crossed the lawn, two tired untidy figures, astonished and unsmiling.

"They have not even learned to come quickly when they are summoned," said Alexis, "but you will soon teach them."

"Yes," said the stumpy little man; "we shall soon teach them."

Dr. and Mrs. Smithson their uncle called the new comers; and he told the children at once that they had asked for education and were going to get it.

"Discipline, as well as education, I hope," he said, with the harsh, crackling laugh that reminded Sandra of a bird she sometimes heard at night.

"Discipline is an important part of education," said Mrs. Smithson.

The children had taken an instant dislike to the two people so suddenly set over them, but they had

not had any opportunity that evening of communicating with each other.

"I'll have a look at this young man at once," the doctor had said with a bluff geniality too artificial to inspire confidence; and he had conducted Philip straight upstairs. The boy had not appeared at supper, and when Sandra asked for him she was told that he was tired and had gone to bed.

Supper had been served in the hall, the fourteenth-century banqueting-hall from which portraits of Sandra's ancestors looked down at their successors. At one end of the hall a collection of ancient spears and guns was arranged on the wall, and the spare, heavy furniture had all been placed here by older generations. In the daytime, when the sun shone in at the windows, the room was beautiful and impressive: but to-night the supper-table seemed to be a little island in gloom without discernible bounds, and the four people who sat at it were affected by their surroundings. Malwina, driven to revolt by the sudden unreasonable call on her resources, stumped from the kitchen to the table with a sour countenance. The food had been hurriedly prepared, and in her opinion the old wine fetched from the cellar by Prince Alexis ought not to have been offered to these guests. But Prince Alexis was in possession, acted as host, and made Sandra feel of no account in her own home.

As she lay awake she did not ask herself how he had done this, because her memory of the miserable meal was as clear as memory of recent pain. She had sat silent while the others talked, she had lowered her eyes when theirs were bent on her, and she had obeyed when her uncle, cursing at the darkness, sent her flying to the kitchen for more candles. When she came back, carrying a lighted one in each hand, they were all three on their feet drinking a toast in a curious, triumphant silence that she remembered

with a shiver of distrust. No words were spoken, no smiles were on their lips, but their eyes exchanged meanings the girl could not fathom. When they had emptied their glasses they sat down again. Then Alexis, noticing Sandra's frightened face, broke the silence noisily.

"Come here," he said; and when she had put the candles on the table he caught her arm, thrust back his chair, and, as if she were actually a child, set her roughly on his knee. She tried to prevent it, but his clutch was like iron round her waist; and when she found that it was useless to struggle she sat rigidly still, her heart beating unwontedly with wrath and fear.

"Can you make anything of her?" he said, addressing Mrs. Smithson. "Look at her well! Her figure is good but not developed. That will come. Her features are not bad. Don't hang your head, little fool. Hold it up when I tell you."

He had roughly pushed up her chin as he spoke, and still holding her to him, had turned so that Mrs. Smithson could examine her more conveniently.

"She wants dressing and drilling," he went on. "Make her vain, make her obedient. I'll provide the money—and the whip. You remember Nietzsche's advice: 'When you go to see a woman take a whip.' I suppose you've never heard of Nietzsche, little savage? Never mind; you can be made to feel."

As he finished speaking he pinched her arm so spitefully that she had cried out with pain and struggled violently to regain her freedom. She had not succeeded. Alexis had only held her more firmly, and laughed in a way that stung her hours afterwards as she thought back of it.

"You have had no wine," he said, and against her will he kissed her lips roughly. "Come, drink out of my glass."

"I never drink wine," she said, and again she tried to struggle to her feet.

This time he rose with her, but still he did not let her go.

"You shall drink the toast we were drinking when you came in just now," he said, forcing his glass close to her lips. "You shall drink to Prince Vavarin."

"To Prince Vavarin!" said Sandra. "Do you mean my father who is dead or Philip who is alive? To-day Philip is Prince Vavarin."

Her uncle answered with a boisterous laugh, and his companions exchanged glances with each other, cruel glances of amusement that she was at a loss to understand. The pressure of her uncle's hand upon her became humiliating and unbearable, the wine he was holding to her lips a drink of shame. With a swift childish sweep of her right hand she pushed it from her, flushed red with confusion when it crashed on the floor, and broke away as her uncle, taken by surprise, drew back with an oath. But in a moment his stride had overtaken her, he seized her arm and made her return with him to the table.

"Pick up those pieces," he had ordered, and after a moment's hesitation she had obeyed. She had not dared to disobey, for he had looked as snarling and infuriated as a tiger ready to prey. If he had beaten her there and then she would not have been surprised. What did surprise her was to find that when she had gathered up the pieces of glass, and humbly placed them where he bade her, he drew her on his knee again, kissed her and laughed at her. How she hated him! and what did such ways signify, she wondered. By instinct she feared and distrusted them.

"Little spitfire! Little hell-cat!" he had called her; and then he had talked English to the Smithsons. Mrs. Smithson had come close to them, stared at her

appraisingly, lifted her long coil of hair, looked at her hands, even looked at her teeth, while her uncle held her fast and evidently discussed her with the woman who had adder's eyes. Presently he went back to Katavian, which his companions spoke haltingly and with a foreign accent.

"No," he said, "I don't want her yet. In the autumn perhaps, after the manœuvres."

Then he turned to Sandra, pushed her from him, and said with a sudden turn in his voice from gallantry to harshness—

"I'm talking of you. You understand that you are in my power. You'll live where I choose, you'll be drilled as I choose. You've everything to learn and you are going to learn it. Get to your room and pack your clothes. To-morrow you leave Ora."

"Leave Ora! Leave Philip!"

"Philip goes too!"

"But Ora is our home!"

"Your home is where I put you. Away! Do as you are told."

"But where are we going?" cried Sandra, fear in her heart and desolation in her voice.

"Where I send you. No more questions."

"Malwina!" exclaimed Sandra as the old servant appeared in the doorway: "Does Malwina go with us?"

"No," said her uncle, "Malwina stays here."

Then, because after his prohibition she had dared to ask a question, he had struck her and sent her dazed and stumbling into Malwina's arms.

"What has happened? What is happening?" Malwina had murmured as she led the girl from the room.

"To-morrow we leave Ora," wept Sandra, "we leave Ora and you."

"But where are you going?" said the old woman,

appalled by what she had seen and what she now heard.

"He has not told me," said Sandra; and half the night she lay awake, remembering what one day had brought forth and wondering what woe lay waiting on the morrow.

CHAPTER VII

THE village of Stavrotas was on the left bank of the river Ruda, about fifty English miles from Rudno, the capital of the duchy, and only five from the frontier of Züringen. The village was a big straggling one of detached farm-houses and barns, surrounded by low-lying pastures, in winter cold and damp, in summer shadeless and mosquito ridden. Beyond the pastures rose the forest, covered hills, and from one of these, built into the rock, the castle of Stavrotas looked at the river and the plain, and at the tiny island in the midst of the river, on which there was a small ramshackle house, uninhabited and decaying.

Many years ago the family of Vavarin had owned land at Stavrotas, and some of it had been part of Alexis's inheritance when his father died. But what could be sold had been sold long since, and all now remaining to him was the tiny island and the house on it, a two-storied wooden one imported years ago from Norway, put up by a village carpenter, without a stove in any room except the kitchen. Even in summer it was damp, though it could be stifling too. At a little distance the back rooms were darkened by neglected trees, at night and in the early morning the river mists hung about it, and when it rained every crevice let in water. It had rained when the children arrived there, tired, hungry, and heart-sick at leaving Ora. They had found that there was no one to receive them and no one to wait on them. Dr. and Mrs. Smithson had rowed themselves back to the

mainland to get supper at the village inn, but they had not taken their charges with them.

"Here you are, and here you'll stay," Dr. Smithson had said roughly, all the honey gone from his voice and all the sleekness from his manner. For the house was even worse than he and his wife expected, smaller, barer, and more unwholesome looking. He had flown into a towering passion when he opened the door, and it seemed to the children that he had been in a passion ever since. Upstairs there were four bedrooms, two better than the others facing Stavrotas, and two at the back of the house. One of the front rooms had a small dark place opening out of it that was big for a cupboard but small and airless for a room. The only window was a tiny one near the ceiling, and it opened on the passage. All over Germany and in Katavia too you still find these small chambers, or *Kammers*, in old-fashioned houses, and you ask yourself how human life can survive many nights in them. But they are used for sleeping purposes, by poor people who let their better rooms, by employers for their dependents, and even by families who are too big for their quarters. The one on the island had a narrow truckle bed in it, but no other furniture.

"This will be my room," Dr. Smithson said to his wife, choosing the room from which the *Kammer* opened. "You take the other and have the girl at the back. The boy will sleep in there."

He had pointed to the *Kammer* that had neither air nor light: and Sandra had hardly been able to believe her ears.

"You don't mean that Philip is to sleep in there!" she cried. "There is a fourth room, with a window and fresh air."

The doctor had turned on her in a fury.

"You mind your own business," he screamed. "We have the whip for you as well as for your brother if you are troublesome, and we mean to use it."

He was a bully, a cruel, evil-tempered bully, and his wife abetted him. That became clear to the children before they had been on the island an hour; but the full torment of their life there only revealed itself bit by bit through the never-ending hours of the ensuing days. On that first evening they had not met again, because the Smithsons had locked Sandra into her room and Philip into his cupboard before they went out to dine. When they met next day it was in the presence of their gaolers, and the girl could only guess at what the boy had endured. His eyes were scared and heavy, his face was pallid, and though he had starved the evening before he could not eat. There was nothing to eat but stale black bread, and there was nothing to drink with it but water. The children had looked at the dirty kitchen table in dismay when they were taken in there and found nothing ready for them.

"Have you no servant?" she said to Mrs. Smithson.

"You'll be the servant while we are here," the doctor's wife said; "there is no one else."

"I have not learned to cook," said Sandra haughtily. "I am afraid that I shall not be able to help you much."

"You'll either cook or starve," said Mrs. Smithson.

"And you? What will you do?"

"We shall have our meals at the inn across the river."

"We had certainly better do that too," said Sandra. "We are used to very good food, and Philip requires it because he is so delicate. If Malwina saw him this morning she would be shocked and she would be cooking for him all day. He must not sleep in that horrible *Kammer* again. He must not. The doctor in Rudno told us that he must be in fresh air day and night and eat the most nourishing food."

Sandra talked, but not light-heartedly. Her words ran on because the sight of Philip scared her into

making a protest. But she knew by this time that they were virtually the prisoners of two evil people, and that they had not been brought here for their happiness, but for some purpose she dared not guess at yet.

"I think I told you yesterday what would happen if you made yourself troublesome," the doctor said blandly. "You must learn to curb your tongue. When my patients are refractory I punish them."

"I'm not your patient," said Sandra bluntly. "I'm not ill."

The doctor was a full-blooded short-necked man, and when he was angry his colour rose and the veins of his forehead stood out blue and threatening. His upper lip went up at one corner with a snarl showing his misshapen teeth, and his voice rose from its usual sugary softness to loud bluster. He hit the open palm of his left hand with the clenched fist of the other and said savagely—

"You are here and you can't get away. You're anything I choose to make you."

It was true. The river ran broad and swift between the island and the shore. Sandra could not swim a stroke, and until she came here last night she had never been in a boat. A dungeon could not have held them more securely as far as she could see. She went close to her brother and spoke to him.

"Come up with me and lie on my bed," she said; "I can see that you have not slept."

"Take care," said the boy under his breath, but as the words left his mouth, the doctor seized Sandra roughly by the arm and pushed her towards his wife.

"Upstairs!" he screamed, incoherent with rage. "Get her undressed. I'll deal with the boy, and you take her. We'll begin as we mean to go on."

What happened next must be told, because it belongs to the history of the children on the island, and because it served both to intimidate Sandra and to

fire her. She knew henceforth that remonstrance was useless and that she must be as wary as a cat and silent. The doctor whipped Philip cruelly, although the boy had not offended, and his wife whipped Sandra. She used a birch rod, and the pain was so acute that the girl screamed though she knew that Philip would hear her screams as she had heard his; but the pain was as nothing compared with the sense of lasting irreparable shame. When the doctor had finished he came into her room smiling like a satisfied devil and he said to Mrs Smithson—

"Put her to bed. She'll be all right in a few hours."

He went out of the room and came back with something in a glass that he and his wife between them poured down the girl's throat, treating her, even in this, as if she were an animal. Then they went away and she lay as they left her, on the bed, sobbing with misery. But she was not awake for long. When she recovered consciousness it was afternoon and Mrs. Smithson had come into the room again.

"Get up and dress yourself and come downstairs," she said to her.

Sandra buried her face in her hands and did not speak. She was still dazed by drugged sleep, but sufficiently roused to want to hide and be alone.

"You heard what I said," Mrs. Smithson went on. "I shall expect you downstairs in ten minutes. We are not going to allow any sulking. You have been punished as a child because you are a child, and we have undertaken to keep you in order. You will be punished again if you don't do as you are told."

Sandra could only guess at what she looked like when Mrs. Smithson had left her and she got up to dress. There was no glass in the miserable room; nothing but the bed and a trunk with her mother's initials on it to hold her clothes. Her eyes felt heavy and swollen and her body sore. She wondered what Philip had been doing all the morning, and whether

she would be allowed to speak to him. She felt starved and light-headed as she crept downstairs.

In the kitchen, on an uncovered table, a meal was spread, a meal of boiled eggs, black bread, and tea. Philip was eating languidly. When Sandra came in he looked up, and the sight of his sister, his companion in misfortune, moved him so strongly that he had to look away again, in order to preserve an outward calm. Sandra wondered who had prepared the meal, but dared ask no questions. She ate and drank because she was faint for want of food, but as her strength returned her sense of desolation became heavier. No prison walls could have held them more securely than this nest of earth, and even if they could by a miracle escape they had no refuge. Nor had they as yet any tale to tell that would save them from being sent back. They had been beaten, but Sandra knew that in Katavia the young were often beaten. Indeed, Father Milias had once preached a sermon in her hearing that admonished parents to train up a child in the way he should go, and reminded them that a rod or a stick was of great assistance in such training. The sermon had been actually meant for some big boys who had stolen apples from the castle orchards, and at the time Sandra had approved of it. But to know that a thievish lout was to be chastised by his father and to feel the rush of scarlet to her face when Dr. Smithson smiled at her meaningly were two different things.

"Well, have you had a good sleep?" he said to her.

"Remember what I told you upstairs," said Mrs. Smithson as Sandra did not speak. "You are to behave yourself and answer when you are spoken to. I have never seen such little savages. I'm afraid that we have undertaken an impossible job."

"What is your job?" said Sandra.

"To civilise you."

"Is that all?"

There was a moment's tense silence during which

the husband and wife looked at the girl murderously. Then with a low, cool laugh Mrs. Smithson broke it.

"Wash up the tea-things and tidy this pig-stye," she said. "That's your job this afternoon. You may depend on us to do ours."

Mrs. Smithson rose as she spoke, and when she had given her order went out of the kitchen followed by the doctor. For the first time since they had left Ora the children were by themselves.

Sandra lifted her hand in warning, listening till she heard a door shut and then flew to her brother's side. They clasped each other tightly and spoke in whispers, for at any moment the Smithsons might be listening and come back.

"He beat you savagely?" murmured Sandra.

"And you? You?"

The boy's hands were clenched and his fine face was set in anger as he watched his sister flush painfully and turn from him.

"Never mind me," she said soon. "I'm strong. Did you sleep?"

"There was no air. I was thirsty. It was hotter than a cupboard. I suppose I fell asleep and called out in my sleep."

The boy seemed to hesitate, and Sandra put her arm more closely round him and held him to her.

"What did he do?"

"He came in. I think he is mad. Sane men are surely not so cruel."

"I believe he has orders to be cruel, and our uncle is not mad. He is hard and greedy and evil. You see it in his face, you hear it in his voice."

"What shall we do?" said Philip.

"We must try to get away. I don't know how yet. But we must try."

"We haven't a friend in the world except Father Milias."

"And Malwina."

"Could they hide us and support us? I fear not."

"I wish we could row and swim," said Sandra.

"Why has Uncle Alexis sent us here with these devils? What does it mean? You think he knows what they are doing."

"I'm sure of it," said Sandra, who had risen now and was clearing the table. As she did this she noticed that there was a little fire still smouldering in the kitchen stove and on the top of it an iron pot with some hot water.

"I wonder who fetched water?" she said.

"I did," said Philip. "They made me fill one of those flat wooden buckets that the peasants use and bring it from the river on my back. I chopped the wood for the fire too."

"You! Prince Vavarin!" cried Sandra.

"If I were dead Uncle Alexis would be Prince Vavarin," said Philip.

CHAPTER VIII

At sunset they heard the Smithsons come out of the room, leave the house, and get into the boat. From the kitchen window the children watched them push off and begin to row across the river.

"They have not locked us in to-night," cried Sandra. "We'll go into the garden. We'll look round and think what can be done. We'll sit close to the water, and if a boat comes we'll ask it to take us away."

"But where can we go? If we went to Ora we should be sent back."

"I would rather beg my bread than stay here. "Wouldn't you?"

"I should like to get away," said Philip. "Perhaps we could find some work to do. But we should have to hide and change our name. I am sure that if the police found us they would bring us back, and then——"

"We should say that we were ill-treated."

"They might not believe us."

"If only we could see him again: if only we knew his name," said Sandra, and there was no need for Philip to ask his sister of whom she spoke. The stranger in the forest was enshrined in their memories, and if they had known how to appeal to him they would have done so.

When evening came they were still sitting near the water, chilly and disconsolate, but thankful to be together. No boat had passed them, for there was little traffic on this reach of the river. They

could see the lights of Stavrotas from where they sat, and high above the village the lighted windows of a castle.

"It looks down on the river as Ora looks down at the forest," said Sandra. "I wonder who lives there?"

They were both sleepy by this time, for Philip had not slept at night and the drug administered to Sandra still bemused her brain. The quiet plash of the water close to their feet, the soothing darkness and the comfort of being together overcame them before long, and they slept fast while the dew fell on them and the stars came out in a clear sky. They were waked by the grinding noise of a boat being dragged to the shore and stumbled to their feet, still heavy with sleep and chilled to the bone. The Smithsons had returned, saw the children in the starlight and ordered them roughly to bed.

"Can we have something to eat?" said Sandra, who had eaten hardly anything since she left Ora and felt famished. She knew that Philip must need food too, and that if he felt as cold as she did he ought to have a hot drink too. She wished she knew English and could understand what the Smithsons said to each other, for they talked as they went back to the house, and no doubt talked of Philip and her. However, if their talk was incomprehensible, their deeds were plain. She was given food in the kitchen, but Philip was bundled up to bed starving. Next morning the boy was downright ill; but no care was taken of him. The doctor listened to his breathing, told him there was nothing the matter and sent him out to chop wood. At midday he fainted and was carried up to bed. Sandra was not allowed to see him, and her questions about him were not answered. By evening, when the Smithsons went out to dine, she felt restless with anxiety, partly because she had watched and seen neither food nor

drink go up to him. The moment she was alone she flew upstairs, but found the doctor's door locked. She called repeatedly to Philip, but got no answer. She ran downstairs again and looked more carefully than before at the outside of the house. The ivy overgrowing it had thick stems, the walls were low, and Sandra, who could climb like a cat, easily scrambled up to a side window of the doctor's bedroom that was hidden by trees from any one watching the house from the mainland near Stavrotas. The window was shut, unluckily, so she had to knock on one of the panes, and though she knocked softly the noise frightened her, for in the surrounding silence she feared it might reach far. But no response came from within, and that alarmed her seriously. She hammered as loudly as she could on the panes and called to Philip to answer and, if he was able, to come. She was just going to slip down and get a stone with which to break the window when it opened and her brother stood there, his face flushed with fever, his eyes heavy, his limbs trembling with weakness. He stretched out his hands to Sandra to help her in and she felt the burning heat of them. The next moment she was inside the room and examining the den in which he lay. There was literally nothing there for his comfort except the truckle bed made up with the coarsest of sheets and a coloured blanket. The little window into the passage was shut and the air so fetid that the girl drew back from it and opened every window in the doctor's room before she went in again.

"Shall I bring you something to eat?" she said to the boy when she had settled him as well as she could in bed again. "I can get bread and milk."

"I'm not hungry," he said drowsily; "I'm thirsty."

She had to climb down through the ivy again, for the doctor's door was locked outside; and she had to climb up again with some milk put into a bottle,

some bread, and a cup. She did not mean to be discovered and stopped if she could help it, so she filled the jug from which she took the milk with water. When she had given Philip the milk and coaxed him to eat some of the bread she knew it was time to leave him, and with sorrow in her heart she did so. But she managed to open the little window in his cell, though she was obliged to shut those in the doctor's room.

"To-night when they are asleep I'll open my door and windows wide," she promised him, "then some air will come in here and you will feel better. Now you must get up and shut the window by which I get out. I have seen to the others."

It was all she could do for the boy, but as the days went by she found that what she did helped him. At night she left everything open in her room and at dawn she woke and shut herself in. When the Smithsons were across the water she took him such food as she could find: and by the end of the week he was decidedly better.

"He's as well as I am," the doctor said to her one day. "He's lazy. I've told him he's to come down and get to work again."

"What sort of work?" said Sandra.

"Any I choose to set him."

By this time Sandra knew that though they were both ill-treated they were by design and order treated differently. She had to work like a servant, but the rough food brought across in the boat was not withheld from her, and her bedroom was airy. Philip was deliberately underfed, set tasks beyond his strength, beaten and sometimes shut up by day as well as by night in his cell. To see such usage going on and have no power to stop it, to see Philip dying by inches before her eyes, made Sandra desperate with wrath and pity. She tried to shield the tortured boy until she found that her interference

brought savage punishment on him; her waking hours were spent in fruitless schemes of escape and the nights were made hideous with dreams from which she awoke to hideous realities. She was a sensible girl, but she had no knowledge of the world, and she was younger than her age. That they could invoke the law or even get the police to help them did not occur to her: and as a matter of fact would not have been easy. The law gave their uncle full power over them and he had delegated it to the Smithsons. They would have argued that they believed in strict discipline and the simple life, and they would have heaped false charges upon the brother and sister. Every one who has dealt with cases of cruelty to the young knows that it is not easy to convict the guilty. A monster is invariably a liar too. At first Sandra did not suspect their ultimate design, but thought that Philip and she were just victims of the bad luck that places the young under the heels of tyrants. In the simple stories she had read she had often followed the adventures of children who were cruelly starved and beaten. But they must have been of a different clay from Philip, for they never seemed to be a penny the worse for all they suffered. He soon became a bag of skin and bones, he had weals on his body that hurt him day and night, and his eyes made Sandra sick with helpless pity. When they were left together she would do the little she could for him, but it was so little that she began to despair.

Even more than the stripes and rough hardships of their lives the children felt the personal dislike and disdain with which they were both regarded. Their most elementary needs were considered troublesome, their presence was plainly hateful to the Smithsons, their neglected minds and bodies were both themes for scorn. The clothes Malwina had packed for them were soon ruined by the work they did indoors and out; there was not a bath or big

vessel of any kind in the house; and Sandra, who had never washed or ironed a handkerchief, was obliged to wash clothes as best she could in the river and dry them in the sun. Week after week life dragged on, without hope of rescue and without news. In July the weather broke and heavy thunderstorms were followed by a week of driving rain that blurred the hills, chilled the air, and swelled the river. The little island and the house on it were sodden with damp, the doctor's temper became explosive. Mrs. Smithson said quiet, chilly things that goaded him to fury, and the children huddled in the fireless kitchen afraid to make a sound.

Sandra's thoughts were fixed now on escape, and she had been stirred to it by something she had read in a page of an old newspaper wrapped round some groceries brought to the island. The newspaper reported the trial in Berlin of a tutor who had grievously ill-treated two boys committed to his charge by wealthy but criminally neglectful parents. One of the boys had actually died under the lash, there had been an inquest and then a public prosecution of the tutor. So other tutors actually did these things, reasoned Sandra, other children agonised and other parents and guardians allowed it to go on. Philip was too young, and now he was too weak and ill to help himself. He would die as this other boy died unless he was soon rescued. That was certain; and if he died how would a trial and scandal help Sandra? Her uncle would be Prince Vavarin then, and Philip's heritage would be his too, she supposed; the forest that had been their heaven and the old castle that had been their home. He would profit greatly by Philip's death.

He desired it!

He had planned it!

"What is it, Sandra?" said the boy, for the sudden thought, the sudden perception of the wickedness

enmeshing them, had turned her ashen white, and he thought she was ill.

"We must get away," she cried, and rose to her feet as if in their emergency some means she had not thought of yet must show itself. Philip followed her out of the house through the lush, dripping grass to the brink of the river. Up and down its grey rushing waters they looked as they had often looked before for some one that did not come. The rain swept past them, half an hour of watching soaked them to the skin, but there was no sign of life on that broad stream.

"We must get away," Sandra said to herself, as she led the boy back to the house, the depths of her heart stirred by the sight of his suffering.

But unless a boat fetched them they were as securely imprisoned on the island as they would have been in mid-ocean in a ship; and so far no boat had come near when the Smithsons were away. No one from Stavrotas had been allowed to land there, and Sandra wondered whether the villagers knew of their existence. They had arrived at dusk and the carriage bringing them had gone straight back to Rudno. The doctor had rowed the children across himself and then fetched his wife and the luggage. The landing stage where the boat waited for him lay at one end of the village and must have been described by Alexis, for he knew where to find it. The secrecy and silence of that arrival seemed, as she remembered it, a prelude to their life here; and it struck Sandra that there was system where she used to suspect caprice. They were rarely allowed to be in sight of Stavrotas by day, but were compelled to perform their tasks at the back of the house where the island faced a barren shore. At midday, when the Smithsons were away, the children were always locked in upstairs.

Sandra had never tried to get out of her own

window, but she thought she could do so if necessary. Morning, noon, and night now she watched for any chance of escape that might present itself. Mrs. Smithson inspired her with the aversion a snake inspires in many people. She had the slanted, cruel eyes of a snake, and the gleam in them was evil. She seemed to hate her sojourn on the island, but to the sufferings of the children she remained callously indifferent. She spent her days mostly upstairs in her own room, and she took no interest in any of the house affairs. But lately she had locked up the food when she went out, so that Sandra could not get at it for Philip. He was not given enough now to keep body and soul together, his whole frame was piteously thin, and his face had the grey, pinched look of slow starvation.

"If we don't get away soon he will die," Sandra said to herself every day now, and she spent the whole evening out of doors, wet or fine, looking in vain for a boat that she could hail. But on the Stavrotas side any that passed hugged the shore and she dared not cry to them loudly, while on the other side of the island the few boats that went by went at a great distance and never saw such signals as she could make. She had tried little bonfires and she had tried waving flags without success. There was very little traffic on the river, and none of it passed close to the island.

Then, suddenly, one grey evening, Sandra, hidden amongst the trees, saw a boat with a postman in uniform come to the landing-stage. He tied up the boat, jumped out and approached the house. In his hand she saw a telegram.

CHAPTER IX

THE evening was so wet and chilly that Sandra had not allowed Philip to watch with her, but had sent him back to the shelter of the house. His cough had become more violent lately and the paroxysms of it left him exhausted. He was too weak, she knew, for rough adventure, but although she meant to shelter him as best she could, she had resolved that even if he risked dying by the way they must seize any chance of escape. Her plan was to get back to Ora and seek the help and protection of Father Milias, but how this was to be done she did not know yet. Certainly Philip could not walk to Ora, and they had no money. But of future ways and means she thought as little as a person who jumps from a burning house or a sinking ship. She had watched the mainland with such fervent longing that the sudden hope of getting there took her breath away, and she went to meet the messenger so much agitated that she could scarcely speak. He looked at the telegram he carried and asked if Dr. Smithson lived here. He was a wooden-faced official, pompous and unperceptive.

"Yes! He lives here," said Sandra, and took the blue envelope from him. She had never received a letter or a telegram in her life, and knew as little of postal arrangements as a person living in a civilised country can. But she had heard the Smithsons complain that there was no post-office at Stavrotas.

"Where do you come from?" she asked.

"From Karadza," he said.

"Where is that?"

He stared in surprise at her ignorance and pointed up stream.

"Can you take my brother and me there?"

The agitation with which she spoke, her educated speech, and the contrast of her poor clothes roused the man's sluggish interest.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Princess Alexandra Vavarin," she said, for on reflection she had made up her mind to let her name be known. Her common sense told her that if they were followed an *alias* would not hide them, and that they had nothing to fear from publicity. It was their oppressors who were trying to act in the dark.

"Why do you want to go to Karadza?" said the man. "By the time we get there the post-office will be shut."

"We don't want the post-office. If you will take my brother, Prince Vavarin, and me to Karadza, you shall be rewarded. I have no money, but I will see that it is sent to you: whatever you ask and more."

"Very well," said the man woodenly. "Come if you like. I'll risk it. But I'm not supposed to carry passengers, so I'll put you out a little short of Karadza. I know where it can be done. But be quick. I have to get back."

Sandra sped back to the house, her heart beating with excitement. She found Philip sitting listlessly in the kitchen, and she dragged him to his feet, her eyes so eager and resolute that he roused himself in response to them.

"A boat!" she gasped. "Quick!" and urged him towards the door. He was thinly clad, but she dared not run upstairs and hunt for the great coat in which he had travelled here. She had no idea where the Smithsons kept his clothes, and they might

return at any moment. The July evening was dangerously light, but after the week's rain the damp mists were beginning to rise from the wastes and pastures lying between the river and the hills. Philip was so weak now that he stumbled when he tried to run, but he was so thin and light that she could carry him : and she actually did so for the last hundred yards. The man waiting in the boat looked at her in astonishment, but he allowed them to get in.

"Row quickly!" she said, and she huddled in the flat of the boat with Philip close beside her : both trembling, she with excitement and he with cold.

"The young gentleman looks very ill," said the man, eyeing them suspiciously. "Why do you bring him out at night when the mists come? He should be at home and in bed."

He was evidently puzzled by his passengers and uneasy about them : and he did not hurry at Sandra's bidding, but plied his oars slowly up stream, making little way and keeping close to the shore.

"I knew that there were two strangers on the island," he went on. "They come to my cousin at Stavrotas for their meals every day. My cousin is the landlord of the 'Eagle.' He said two strangers come every day and that they bought food in the village besides eating themselves. He even vowed that his son Paul rowed round the island on Sunday and saw other people there who never come across the water. I am not interested in what happens at Stavrotas, but a village has eyes and tongues. Are you my cousin's customers at the 'Eagle'? But you cannot be, of course. The telegram in your hand is to Smithson and you have given me a high noble name of Katavia. Who is Smithson?"

"We have never left the island since we came there in May," said Sandra, answering the earlier part of his harangue first.

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave it now?"

"We want to get back to Ora."

"How can you get to Ora without money? It is a day's journey, by carriage and then by train, and then again by carriage. I have seen Castle Ora. You do not look as if you belonged there, my good girl. Young people should tell the truth."

"We lived there till we were brought to the island," said Sandra. "My brother is——"

"He hardly hears what you say. He shuts his eyes. He is not fit for a night's journey. Take my advice and go back to the island. I am as wide awake as other people, and I believe you are running away. Go back while there is time. I will take you and charge nothing for my pains."

"No! No!" cried Sandra, raising herself in an agony of fear. "For the love of God take us on. You have guessed truly. We are running away. Look at this!"

With some difficulty she got Philip to sit up so that she could take one arm out of his coat. Beneath it a ragged shirt hardly covered the scars of old stripes and the livid, unhealed fresh ones on the boy's emaciated back. It was enough. The man's wooden stupidity changed for the moment to wrath and horror.

"Such a thing I have never seen," he said, and seemed to meditate.

"What has he done to deserve it?" he added.

"Nothing! Nothing at all," said Sandra, indignantly.

"Then who thrashes him like that?"

"Dr. Smithson."

"Who is Dr. Smithson?"

"He is a doctor. Our uncle, Prince Alexis Vavarin, sent us to the island with Dr. Smithson and his wife. They are very cruel to us, as you see."

She wished the man would not row in this leisurely

way and stare at them and ask so many questions, but she could not risk offending him either by her silence or by urging him to put on pace.

"Have you no parents?" he asked.

"They are both dead."

"It is a strange story: a story I find it difficult to believe. I hope I am not doing wrong in taking you."

"But you have seen!" exclaimed Sandra in despair. She stooped over the boy as she spoke and very tenderly tried to put his coat on again without giving him pain. But he winced at her touch and opened his eyes.

"We have got away," she whispered to him. "We have got away."

As she spoke the postman began to row with increased energy, and Sandra saw that his eyes were looking fixedly down stream.

"What is it?" she said, for she was still hiding in the flat of the boat and could not see.

"Another boat comes."

"Who is in it?"

"I cannot see yet."

"But we are ahead."

"We are ahead. But they are gaining. This is a heavy boat and I am not a strong rower."

"Could they stop us if they came near?"

"Undoubtedly."

"What would happen then? Could they get into this boat?"

"I cannot tell. I want no accidents. The river is deep and I have never learned to swim. Have you?"

"No," said Sandra.

"I see them now. There are two people in the boat, a man and a woman. They are both rowing hard."

"If you put us ashore here would they see us?"

"Surely. The mist is a land mist. Besides, the bank is steep and high here. Look at it!"

"I don't want to be seen. Have you nothing in the boat to cover us—to hide us—if they come?"

"I have nothing that would cover a fly."

"Then put us ashore. We can both climb and we will run."

"That boy cannot run," the man said stolidly. "But I will put you ashore. I am a poor man with my living to earn and I do not want to be mixed up in anything disagreeable. If you are really a princess and have lived at Castle Ora you must have money and friends. There is some mystery here and I like not mysteries. Here they come. It is too late."

Sandra felt as a man does who, clutching at a support in peril, finds it break in his hands. She raised herself in terror, for she heard the oars of the other boat close by now and heard the doctor's voice instructing his wife to remain where she was. The next moment he shot alongside, and, having shipped his oars in readiness, clutched the other boat, pulled close to it, and before anyone could stop him, got in. At first he neither looked at the children nor spoke to them, but as he settled himself in the stern and found the steering rope he gave Philip, who lay closest, a savage kick.

"How is it that this young lady and this boy are in your boat?" he said to the postman blandly.

"They asked me to take them to Karadza," replied the postman. "I thought they wanted a promenade."

"Do you know who they are?"

"The young lady has told me that she is a princess and lives at Castle Ora. I know nothing else."

"Yes, you do," interposed Sandra. "You know that my brother is dying of ill-treatment. You have seen it."

Still the doctor did not look at her or speak to her; and still his manner to the postman was soft

and civil. But Sandra knew the underlying signs of storm in his face and had seen Philip quail at his kicks.

"I am an English doctor of medicine," he went on. "These young people have been placed in my care by their guardian, who is a great noble and a friend of the Duke's. Any one who interferes with them interferes with the LAW. Do you understand, fellow? Do you want the police after you? Have you ever heard of the abduction of minors, fool?"

From honeyed blandness the doctor's voice had risen to ferocity. His eyes bulged with passion, but at the same time they scanned the shore, and when the high bank gradually grew less high and joined a sandy-looking flat with low scattered dunes he drew the boat inland.

"It's nothing to me," the postman answered sullenly. "I'm a poor man with my living to earn and I can't afford to mix myself up with other people's affairs."

"What were you doing on the island? How is it you landed there?"

"I took a telegram. The young lady has it in her hand."

Sandra mechanically opened her hand and gave the crumpled envelope to the doctor, who took out the contents and read the message hurriedly.

"It is from the Prince," he said to the postman. "It contains important instructions. Perhaps you think he would have been pleased to hear that his wards were wandering like thieves and vagrants through the land? Perhaps you think you could not have been punished for aiding and abetting them. Do you know why they have been put with us on the island? Have you ever heard of young hardened criminals for whom the only hope is segregation and strict discipline? Ask any one you meet for the story of Ora. It is notorious. Ask how these children

have grown up and who guarded them. It is known all over the duchy."

"I knew there was a castle at Ora, but I knew not that there were children there," mumbled the postman.

"We are not criminals. All he says is untrue," cried Sandra, making her protest for Philip's sake rather than for her own. She was not in a state of mind when the thought of punishment to come could act as a check. She was intensely excited and past fear.

"No more talk," blustered the doctor: and then he addressed the postman.

"Put us ashore at once," he said, "and unless you want to lose your uniform and your job, hold your tongue about this business."

The postman was the son of a peasant, a vain, stupid man, easily intimidated, afraid of giving offence in high quarters. For a moment he had been stirred to pity, but he was not prepared to run risks. Besides, he wanted his boat to himself again. The white, wild-eyed girl half-rose now and looked so desperate that he thought she meant to throw herself into the water. If she was in that mood she would not care whether other lives got lost or not. The situation had an ugly air, and he began to row sullenly towards the shore, wishing he had never seen the children or the threatening, smooth-faced foreigner, or the silent woman rowing alongside with a firm, steady stroke.

The doctor had seized Sandra's arm when she jumped up, he had pulled her down beside him and kept his grip on her till the boat landed. Then he made her get out, and he half-lifted, half-pushed Philip out. The boy lay on the ground where he fell, and Sandra knelt over him and watched the boat in which she had sought refuge make way up stream. The postman had avoided her eyes for some time now: and she had seen him greedily catch and pocket a coin the doctor threw him.

"If it had not been for you I would have upset the boat," she said in a low voice to the boy. "Shall I do it as we go back? Shall we die and end this?"

"Well!" said the doctor, coming up to them. "What did you think you were going to do? I'd have caught you on land if I'd missed you on water. The police would have found you by night and brought you back. How did you mean to pay your way? Where were you bound for? Come! Tell me your plan of campaign."

Sandra rose to her feet and looked the man straight in the face, but his shifty eyes never met hers straightly.

"I am not afraid of the police," she said.

He turned petulantly to his wife, who had just landed her boat and spoke to her in English. Then he dragged Philip roughly from the ground, shoved him forward, finally lifted him into the bows and pushed it off without getting in himself.

"You and I are going to walk back to Stavrotas," he said to Sandra, who had run after him to the edge of the water. "I don't think your brother will play any pranks, but we can't trust you. The boat nearly capsized when you jumped up just now."

"I wish it had!" said Sandra.

She walked on in moody silence, too wretched to remember that she was cold and hungry: too anxious about Philip to think of what the future threatened herself.

"I suppose you know that you will both be severely punished for this?" the doctor said in his most silky voice.

"Are you going to torture Philip again?" she cried, turning on him with such fury that he started aside. "Are you safe yourself? That postman has seen him and knows our name. He could bear witness if Philip dies as that other boy did."

"What other boy? What are you talking about?"

"You forget that I can read. You bring bits of newspaper to the house and leave them about. Don't you ever read yourself? Haven't you followed the trial of the tutor who ill-treated two boys, his pupils, as you ill-treat us? One of them died while he was being beaten. There was an inquest. It was all discovered. Everything that devil had done was brought to light."

Sandra's voice broke with the passion of her indictment and her eyes were so misty that she stumbled as she walked. But when the doctor put out his hand to steady her she avoided him with a gesture of abhorrence.

"The boy died," she said. "It was all found out, and the man who murdered him is in prison. But the boy died!"

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CHAPTER X

ALTHOUGH the children did not know English they had found out that the doctor and his wife were often in violent disagreement and that the woman was contemptuous of the man. Her eyes and her low, biting voice told them this even when they could not follow what she said. The doctor would bawl and bluster, but she would remain disdainfully quiet, often hardly answering him. She had very little to do with the children, but lived mostly upstairs in her bedroom, or in the sitting-room opposite the kitchen, that the doctor called his study. She never ate in the house nor did any cooking there. Indeed, the food brought back in the boat hardly needed cooking. If the children had an egg or a slice of coarse sausage with their bread, they were fed for the day. Lately very little milk had come to the island, no butter and no meat.

When Mrs. Smithson had brought the boat to Stavrotas to take back her husband and Sandra, her eyes had had a glitter of triumph in them, and Sandra saw that the doctor looked crestfallen. They talked together late into the night. The girl heard the rise and fall of their voices when she woke from the snatches of sleep that overtook her in her misery. She had failed, and Philip was in torment again because she had failed. Her thoughts went back over every moment of their short escape, and she wondered what she could have done differently, what bribe she might have offered, what peril they should have dared. She expected that vindictive punish-

ment would be dealt to them next day, and every nerve in her body felt on edge when she thought of Philip being mishandled in his present condition. The thought of suicide began to haunt her, and in the morning as she dressed she looked at the river and asked herself whether death was the only door open to them. When she went downstairs Philip was not there, and though the doctor and his wife sat in the kitchen, she did not venture to ask after him. She saw that there was bread on the table and some sausage left from the day before. The fire was rarely lighted for the children, but water for tea was boiled over a spirit lamp. This morning it had boiled an egg, too, and beside the tea-pot there was milk and a single cup and saucer. The doctor looked up when Sandra came in, bade her good-morning civilly, and when she had taken her usual place said in his most silken voice—

"We want to know why you tried to run away from us yesterday?"

At first Sandra did not speak. She looked from one face to the other and found both evil and both hard. She suspected some trap behind the doctor's bland manners.

"Are you going to answer when I speak to you?" he said in the same low voice.

"I wanted to take Philip to Father Milias," she stammered. "He is very ill."

"You think so?"

"He is dying by inches. He will die quite soon if this goes on."

"If what goes on?"

The girl's face was white and her voice unsteady, but she stood her ground.

"He is starved," she said, "he is beaten. He is locked up in that dark, filthy den. When he is not there he is driven out to chop wood and draw water. You want him to die. I am certain of it."

"She is hysterical," said Mrs. Smithson.

"What can you expect?" said Dr. Smithson with a sneer. "Like mother, like child."

"What do you know of my mother?" cried Sandra.

"I know her story."

"Her story!"

The husband and wife glanced at each other and laughed unpleasantly.

"Ask your uncle to tell it you," said Mrs. Smithson. "It isn't our business."

"I am sure that my mother's affairs cannot be your business," said Sandra, with the pride of race that her direct glance and gallant carriage expressed very well. "I am afraid that your business is to carry out my uncle's orders."

"You'll find that same uncle a hard nut to crack, my girl," said the doctor. "You're under his heel, and if you oppose him he'll crush you. Might is right where he lives. You're weak, and so you'll have to knock under."

"I hope I shall never see him again," said Sandra, and again the husband and wife both laughed unpleasantly.

"You'll see him very shortly," said Mrs. Smithson; "we are going to Rudno."

"To Rudno!" cried Sandra. "All of us?"

"No. You and I are going by ourselves."

"When?"

"This morning."

"This morning? For how long?"

"For two or three days. We are going to buy clothes."

"For whom?"

"For you. Your uncle says you are to be dressed properly in future. I had a letter from him last week, and the telegram you intercepted yesterday told us to meet him at Rudno to-day. He is going there for the Coronation."

The news took the girl by surprise, but she showed no pleasure at it.

"Will Philip be alive when I come back?" she said, her brows bent, her words hardly audible.

"Nonsense!" said Dr. Smithson. "What do you know about illness? There is nothing much the matter with him. Anyhow, you've got to obey orders."

"Can I see him before I go?"

"Why not? Don't you see him every day?"

"Is he getting up?"

"Probably not. He usually lies in bed till he's kicked out."

Sandra flew upstairs and found, as she expected, that Philip was lying in bed still, awake, but listless and drowsy. She felt his hot hands, saw his heavy eyes, and knew that he was feverish. He said he was thirsty, but could not eat: so she ran downstairs again and got him a cup of tea.

"I am to go to Rudno to-day," she said to the boy when she had made him as comfortable as she could. His emaciated hands tightened on hers, and though he did not speak, she knew that he did not want her to leave him.

"They don't ask me whether I wish to go," she said.

"How long?" whispered Philip.

"A day or two. I am glad to go. Who knows? In a big town I may get a chance."

"What is the date?"

"I have kept no count. I have no idea."

"On July 20 the Duke was to be crowned. It must be near that."

"Will Uncle Alexis be there? Shall I see him?"

"It is possible."

"I shall tell him that you are ill."

The boy had relapsed into the drowsy state from which she had roused him for a moment, and as she

hung over the bed watching him anxiously Mrs. Smithson came to the door of the doctor's room and told her to get ready at once, as they were to start in less than an hour. So, with the picture of Philip's wasted face in her mind, with the memory of his wistful eyes and the tight clasp of his hand ever present in her thoughts, Sandra went to Rudno, first by boat to Karadza and then by train. She had never been in the capital before, never stayed in an hotel and never seen large shops. It was crowded for the Coronation, hung with flags and bunting; gay, sunshiny, full of soldiers, full of peasants in holiday costumes, full of fruit and roses. They arrived at the station at the same moment as Prince Etzel, of the Huns, and might have rushed with the crowd to watch his reception. But Mrs. Smithson found a taxi with some difficulty, and drove straight to an inferior hotel in the outskirts of the town. A room had evidently been engaged for them, and they were shown into it, the landlord looking inquisitively at the closely veiled foreign lady and the badly dressed girl with her. They would have their meals up here, he was told, and would like something to eat at once. When they had eaten they would require a taxi.

"The Prince said nothing of meals upstairs," replied the man sulkily. "That would cost more naturally. As for taxis they are not to be had out here. The lady is evidently a stranger and does not know that the Duke and Duchess are to be crowned the day after to-morrow."

"What has that to do with my meals?" snapped Mrs. Smithson. "They will be served up here or I shall leave the hotel."

"But the Prince——" began the man, and then stopped short: for there was a short rap on the door that opened at once and let in Alexis Vavarin. Sandra thought he looked even more coarse and disagreeable than her memories of him, but his uniform

was a trim new one and his manner was new too; for it was triumphant and excited.

"Go!" he said insolently to the landlord of the inn, and then he turned to Mrs. Smithson.

"Will this do for you?" he said, and as he spoke in Katavian, Sandra could follow what was said.

"It's a miserable place," replied Mrs. Smithson.

"You wanted to be out of the town, didn't you?"

"Oh, it will do for a day or two. But I'm not going to eat downstairs. If you intend to pay us surprise visits we will have a second room up here."

"You won't get it. Every hen-roost is occupied because of the Coronation."

"Then we could not have chosen a worse time to come."

"I'm not so sure. There is safety in crowds."

They had stood together near the door by which he had entered while they exchanged these remarks; but now Alexis came further into the room and turned his attention to Sandra.

"How thin she is!" he said discontentedly. "I detest thin women!"

"Is she thinner than she was?" said Mrs. Smithson with indifference.

"Thinner! She looks as if she had been starved," cried Alexis.

"I have been starved," said Sandra. "Didn't you know it?"

There was a flash of hope in her eyes as she came up to her uncle, and scanned his face anxiously while she went on speaking—

"Philip will die if it goes on much longer," she said. "He is very ill."

Then the hope died out of her eyes, for her appeal met with no response of pity or anger from her uncle. He turned to Mrs. Smithson and said in an undertone—

"Is this true?"

"The boy is certainly ill," Mrs. Smithson admitted, and Sandra, watching them, saw more in their eyes than she heard in what they said. "My husband is doing everything in his power——"

"I feel sure he is," said Alexis.

"He expects shortly to be successful."

"It is time."

"In fact, he would like to wind up the business as soon as possible and return to South America."

"If they go to South America where shall we be?" said Sandra to her uncle.

"Would you like to be with me?" said Alexis, seizing one of her hands and then holding her to him as he had done at Ora.

"We should like to be at home again with Malwina," said Sandra, her heart beating so fast and foolishly that it impeded her voice. But she could not escape from the man's powerful grasp, and she hated to be near him.

"Little fool! Little scarecrow!" he jeered. "You shall be at home soon with me. You shall be Princess Vavarin before you are six months older —unless the order comes to shave my head."

"I can never be Princess Vavarin," said Sandra; "Philip's wife will be Princess Vavarin."

"But if Philip dies—as you say he will?"

"If he dies he has been murdered," said Sandra, wrenching herself suddenly free. "It is you who sent us to the island. You can take us away. There is not an hour to lose—if Philip is to live."

"What does she mean?" said Alexis to Mrs. Smithson.

"She has these attacks," Mrs. Smithson replied. "I suppose she is neurotic. You won't find her easy to manage."

Alexis laughed. Then he advanced towards Sandra, who tried in vain to get away from him, and seized her again roughly, driving her before him till they

reached the only easy-chair in the room. He sat down on it, pulled her into his arms and said to Mrs. Smithson—

"I told you to beat her if she was troublesome."

"It has been done," said Mrs. Smithson, "but you see that she is still troublesome. Only yesterday she put the boy into a boat and tried to run away. It was a wet night and he was chilled to the bone. You can imagine how bad that was for him. Another time, when we came back late at night, we found them asleep outside in the damp grass. She is as ignorant and suspicious as a peasant, and blames us for the consequences of her own follies."

"How did they get the boat?" said Alexis sharply.

"The postman took your telegram to the island. You addressed it there."

"Then they talked to him?"

"I suppose so."

"What did you say to him?" Alexis asked Sandra; but she set her lips mutinously and did not speak.

"It doesn't matter," he said contemptuously. "But it might be well to hurry things; especially if there is to be war."

"War!"

"We are ready for it."

"But who thinks of war?"

"We have a sacred mission. Some day we must fulfil it. We must civilise the world."

Mrs. Smithson's narrow, derisive eyes took the man's measure and found it wanting.

"You!" she said: and then her tone changed. "I am here to receive what you have promised," she reminded him.

"I've nothing here," he said in a bullying voice. "You can whistle for it here. We shall meet in Berlin before long, I hope. You can come to old Preussker's again and bring that baggage with you;

dress her decently and then bring her. We'll have a wedding, war or no war."

"Am I to buy wedding clothes or mourning?" said Mrs. Smithson acidly.

"Wedding clothes!" cried Sandra. "For whom will you buy wedding clothes? What can you mean?"

CHAPTER XI

HER uncle's laugh always offended and frightened Sandra more than his scowl. It was the laugh of a bully, without mirth or good-humour in it.

"You are a pretty girl," he said. "At least you will be when you get some clothes and are plump again. Would you like to be married?"

"I am not old enough," said Sandra, quailing at the thought his leer and his tone conveyed.

"You are seventeen. Women are mothers at that age very often."

"What other women do is their affair. I am going to stay with Philip."

"You've just told me he only has a few days to live."

The brutality with which he reminded her of Philip's peril, the callousness with which he spoke of it imperilled the girl's self-control, and she looked at the other woman in the room, but found neither pity nor help in her hostile bearing.

"Will you please let me go?" she said to her uncle. "I am seventeen, as you say. I am too old to be treated like a child, and I wish you would remember it. I—I am in great trouble about Philip, and until he is out of his present danger I cannot think of anything else. I don't want new clothes. I want to go back to Philip—at once."

"Little fool!" said Alexis, pinching her ear playfully and still keeping her on his knee. "You'll do as you're told, my gracious one; now and hereafter. Who are you to oppose me? I have the strength.

I have the power. I have the money. Therefore, my gracious one, I play the tune and you dance to it. *Basta!*"

He put her down from his knees as he finished and spoke to Mrs. Smithson.

"Can you rig her up differently by eight o'clock and dine with me at the Hôtel de l'Europe?" he said.

"I prefer to dine here," said Mrs. Smithson.

"Why?"

"I'm in travelling clothes."

"That has nothing to say. We shall choose a quiet table."

"I prefer not to come," said Mrs. Smithson.

"Any one would think that you are afraid to be seen in Rudno," said Alexis. "I'll fetch the girl then."

"That's as you please."

"I would rather stay with you," said Sandra to Mrs. Smithson.

Alexis only laughed again and swaggered out of the room, trailing his sabre behind him. Sandra watched him and watched the woman who should have been her shield against this man.

"What does he mean? What does he want?" she said.

"You must be very silly if you can't guess," said Mrs. Smithson.

"Tell me."

"He intends to marry you."

"Me! His niece! Against my will!"

"What do you suppose your will weighs with a man like that?"

"I can refuse at the altar."

The woman laughed at that, and the tone of her laugh struck down Sandra's last defence and filled her with foreboding.

"I don't know what his plans are," said Mrs.

Smithson. "If he wants you he'll take you. He hasn't any scruples. You may be glad to marry him when the day comes."

Even Sandra, childish and uninformed as she was, had some premonition of the fate suggested.

"I would rather die," she said, and there was a light in her eyes and the thought of a smile on her lips as she turned towards the cold, unfriendly woman watching her. "Heaven has given us death," she said. "If people are cruel there comes a moment when their victims escape them."

"Prince Vavarin will be a powerful man and a rich one," said Mrs. Smithson. "Most women would be glad to marry him—in his own country."

"My brother is Prince Vavarin," said Sandra.

"Your brother! Your brother!" mocked Mrs. Smithson. "It is time some one told you. The boy is only your half-brother, and he has no more right to call himself Prince Vavarin than any beggar in the street."

Sandra's wide-open reproachful eyes showed that she was startled, but also that she only half understood.

"Philip is Prince Vavarin," she said. "Even my uncle acknowledges that."

"He may be in law. He is not your father's child. Your mother had a lover. If she had not drowned herself your father would have murdered her. Every one in Ora knows the story, I believe. At least, your uncle says so."

Sandra's thoughts and feelings were in a tumult; she suffered but she could not speak; and the only clear idea in her mind was that this new cruel light thrown on Philip's parentage made no difference to her love for him.

"I cannot believe any story that my uncle tells or that you repeat," she said; and Mrs. Smithson did not answer her. She had struck her blow and left it to work as it would in the girl's mind.

For the moment it worked dully. Sandra was so alarmed for Philip, and so filled with dread of her uncle, that what had happened to her parents long ago affected her like an evil dream that recedes before the pressure of realities. Compared with Philip her parents were shadows in her life. She remembered them, but not with the hungry affection he had given and received day by day for many years. As for the inner meanings of the tragedy, hurled at her with brutal suddenness, she hardly understood it or followed its consequences. A girl better acquainted with the world would have been more overwhelmed, and when Mrs. Smithson set out with her for Rudno Sandra was still thinking of Philip's bodily suffering while she was away, and not of his aspersed legitimacy. But she made one reference to it without apparent rhyme or reason; and showed Mrs. Smithson that the matter was in her mind.

"If you tell Philip this wicked story I shall assure him it is not true," she said. "It might make him uncomfortable."

"You only have to ask at Ora. You will find that it is true," said Mrs. Smithson.

"I should not ask any one at Ora about my father and mother," Sandra answered. "If they were unhappy it is best forgotten."

"You might have known there was something wrong by the way you were treated," said Mrs. Smithson.

"There was nothing wrong until my uncle came. Our misfortunes date from the hour of his arrival."

Mrs. Smithson made no reply. They were crossing a crowded market-place occupied on one side by the old cathedral and on the others by gabled houses. Then they got into a broad, handsome street of shops, full of people and hung with flags and bunting. The sun was shining brilliantly, a band was playing on the steps of a public building, soldiers came marching

down the street, some of the Court carriages passed by, the peasants stood about in idle groups as if it were Sunday, and when the doors of the cathedral opened the strains of the organ and a full choir floated through the air and mingled with the other sounds of the expectant crowd. Sandra was led through this scene, in which she had no part, as quickly as possible, by the closely veiled woman in charge of her; for Mrs. Smithson performed her business in Rudno as if she hated it, looking neither to right nor left, furtive and ungracious. She went straight to a big draper's shop and explained that she wanted clothes for the young lady with her; gowns first and then under-linen and other things. Some might be ready made and some might remain on order, but all must be put into train to-day and to-morrow, as on the following day the young lady would leave Rudno.

"Why am I having these clothes?" said Sandra, when for more than an hour gowns of various kinds had been shown them.

"Because your uncle wishes it."

"Why has he not wished it before?"

"You had better ask him."

"What is the use of such clothes on the island?"

"Perhaps you will not be on the island much longer."

"Why have you taken no blue and no pink things? Why is everything black or white or grey?"

"If you wish to wear pink you can. I thought that as your father died in March——"

"My father!" cried the girl. "I had forgotten my father."

A tumult in the street, a roar of applauding voices broke in on the sombre monotone of the girl's voice, stopped her and startled her. As she rose to her feet all the assistants in the room ran to the windows

excitedly, and one window opening on a balcony was thrown wide open.

"The Duke! The Duchess!" they cried. "They are coming in state from Avlona.

Sandra ran to the window with them and stood right in front, pressed close to the rail of the balcony by the eager men and women who had politely let her through, but clustered behind, resolved to see all they could to-day when they had a good view for nothing.

Soldiers came by first, the Duke's own regiment of White Hussars; then came several cars and carriages, with members of the Court; then more soldiers, then important people on horseback, and then in an open carriage, drawn by six horses, the new Duke and Duchess, Torquil and Patricia. Sandra had a swift impression of a splendid equipage, a vociferous crowd, a young man in a white uniform saluting his subjects, a young woman beside him radiantly happy, beautifully dressed, holding coppery pink roses that blended with what she wore. As they passed a child in the crowd, lifted in a man's arms, offered some white roses, and the Duchess took them. Then the carriage went on; another holding the royal children followed, and others bringing guests and some distinguished strangers completed the procession. Sandra had not spoken so far. The sudden spectacle of splendour and presumably of happiness, the busy traffic of the streets and even the good-humoured comments of the shop people, affected her as the thought and sight of normal daily life affects the doomed. She felt sick with longing for a place amongst honest folk again, and for some way out of the toils in which she was enmeshed and Philip nearly strangled; and when she saw the stout, misshapen figure of Malwina stumping slowly along the opposite pavement with other peasants she could not control her impulse to call to her old nurse or wait to ask whether she was

likely to help herself by doing so. Before Mrs. Smithson, who stood near, guessed what she was about to do, she leant impulsively forward, and shouted as loudly as she could in a high tragic voice of appeal—

"Malwina! Malwina! Come here!"

The words had hardly left her lips when Mrs. Smithson pulled her roughly from the front of the balcony back into the room behind. But Sandra, as she perforce withdrew, kept her eyes anxiously on the street and just caught a glimpse of another carriage. Four gentlemen sat in it, and at the sound of her voice they looked up at her. Three of them were in uniform, but one was in plain black; and the one in black was the doctor who had helped them when Philip fainted in the forest of Ora. She wanted to ask who he was, but Mrs. Smithson, without a moment's delay, made her put on her hat, told the shopkeeper she would return later to complete her order, and with a firm grip on Sandra, took her downstairs and put her into a taxi. Malwina was nowhere to be seen. When they got back to their hotel they went upstairs to their room, and Mrs. Smithson took out a novel and read it. Her silence and her watchfulness were more hateful than any invective could have been, and Sandra felt like a sane person who is watched and guarded by a keeper as if he were a dangerous lunatic. She wanted to break away and could not. At seven o'clock Alexis appeared again.

"How is this?" he said, looking at the girl. "Could you find nothing for her to wear? I can't take her out like that."

"She made a scene," said Mrs. Smithson.

"Made a scene!"

"She screamed across the street to that old peasant woman who was at Ora. I thought it best to bring her straight back here."

"What did you do that for?" said Alexis, turning to Sandra with a scowl.

"I wanted to see Malwina," said the girl.

"You will find that she is troublesome," said Mrs. Smithson.

"Troublesome!"

The man laughed and raised his hand. Sandra quailed beneath him, for he stood close to her about to strike. Her thoughts were in a whirl, and it was instinctively that she put up her own hands to guard her face.

"Look at her!" he shouted. "She has no more strength than a mouse and no more chance against me than a child. "Troublesome! Woe to her if she is. Who crosses me I crush."

A thundering blow descended on Sandra, head and face. She fell sideways under it, but was roughly pulled back to receive a second and a third. Blinded, and dazed by pain she uttered a scream. This brought Mrs. Smithson to that end of the room.

"We don't want a scandal," she said icily. "We are not on the island, Prince Alexis."

"She infuriates me," said Alexis, and his voice was like an animal's determined to keep and worry its prey.

"So I see," said Mrs. Smithson. "But it is not always wise to give way to fury."

"She must learn what it means to offend me. You have taught her nothing. Only let me get hold of her——"

He shook his fist at Sandra because further speech failed him. He was scowling and purple with rage, while his antagonist, the half-starved white-looking girl winced when he raised his hand again and tried hard not to sob or cry.

"You had better pay a visit to the island," said Mrs. Smithson. "You can demonstrate your method there in safety. Here if you make much more noise

we shall have the landlord in and perhaps the police."

"You talk nonsense," said Alexis. "This girl is in my control. Do you suppose I am not allowed to correct her? No one can interfere with me. I snap my fingers at your landlord and your police. But I shall not take her out to dinner with me. I cannot appear in public with a scarecrow. I have too much respect for my uniform."

"Very well," said Mrs. Smithson. "We will dine here. To-morrow we will finish our shopping, and next day we shall return to the island."

CHAPTER XII

PRINCE SERGIUS of Katavia was two years older than his brother Torquil, the reigning Duke. But Sergius had renounced the succession in order to practise medicine, and he had never regretted his choice. The duties his brother had to perform would have been hateful to him and so would the daily ceremonial of Court life. He worked hard, was making a world-wide name for himself, would be addressed as Dr. Sergius, and seldom remembered that he had been born to wear a crown. When the old Duke Boris died, Sergius came to live in Rudno, had his name and medical qualifications on his door-plate, and took fees from patients who could afford to pay. He occupied a large, old-fashioned house with a fine garden sweeping down to the river, and every pretty, well-born girl in Rudno wished he would ask her to share it with him. For though he was absorbed in his work, he was neither a pedant nor a dryasdust, but a man of the world, with an austere beauty of feature that reminded his adorers of a Dürer portrait hanging in the picture gallery of the palace. However, he seemed to turn a blind eye to pretty girls and to have no mind for marriage. The busiest gossips in the town had never been able to discover his part in a love affair, and even venomous tongues respected him. He did a good deal of work amongst the poor of the town, was on excellent terms with the burghers, had some friends amongst men of his own profession, but was most intimate with Torquil and Patricia. So it came about that though he avoided Court functions he was a great

deal at the palace and at Avlona, and though he lived quietly he entertained the Duke and Duchess whenever they could come to him. He had been at Avlona for a few days recently in order to meet Sir Joseph and Lady Looper, the English friends who had once employed his brother as secretary, when he was travelling incognito as "Mr. Broom." They had come from England for the Coronation, and meant to spend some weeks in Katavia. So he had driven back to the town in one of the royal carriages, had heard Sandra's piteous call to her old nurse, and looking up had seen the girl he had met in May in the forest. She had attracted him by her beauty and simplicity, but she had not haunted him when she looked happy as she did now when he saw her tragically changed. He could not forget her. He had seen her snatched away, and he had driven on in ruminating silence till he reached the palace where, amongst the people assembled to receive the Duke and Duchess, he saw old Prince Lussin, formerly his uncle's Chancellor. As soon as he could he took him to a quiet corner where they might talk undisturbed.

"What do you know of the Vavarins?" he asked.

The old man's face darkened with anger and dislike, and his glance travelled towards the adjoining room, where Torquil and Patricia stood amongst their guests.

"Alexis Vavarin is there," he said. "He has wormed his way in again through some one in the German Embassy. I turned my back on him yesterday. To-day, in the Presence chamber, I could not. But if he is to be about the Court I shall retire to Stavrotas. I will not meet that man on equal terms. What is he doing in Rudno? What is his business here? His place is with his regiment—of swine. In Katavia he has no place."

"What has he done, Lussin? I never heard his name till the other day."

"Eleven years ago, Your Highness, when you were a boy of eighteen, and studying at Zlot, his name stank in the army. He served the accursed country he serves now, as a spy. We had all the proofs of his treason, but my master, the late Duke, would not proceed against him because of the scandal. He was asked to go, and he went—very quietly. Ever since he has been employed by Berlin."

"He is a brother of Prince Vavarin, who died this spring."

"The only brother, but not the heir."

"The other day I met two children in the forest of Ora—a boy about twelve and a girl of sixteen."

"They would be the son and daughter of Prince Vavarin, who died this spring. I wonder who is looking after their interests. Inquiries should be made, Your Highness. Until this moment I had forgotten that there were children. The name has not been heard for so long."

"I have always known that there was some tragedy connected with the family, but I never heard what it was," said Sergius.

"This man, this Alexis, had a hand in it. His sister-in-law took pity on him and let him come to the castle when everyone else had cast him out. He spied on her. Prince Carol of Gothland was her lover. He got away; but she, poor soul—the story runs that her husband and his brother drove her with drawn swords to the cliff edge. At any rate, her body was found next day dashed and broken by the torrent. She may have committed suicide. No one knows for certain now, except that man in the next room."

"I should like to see him," said Sergius.

He got up and walked by himself into the adjoining room, which was a large one and rather crowded today. When he had been there for a short time and had spoken to various people he saw that a man in German uniform, whose appearance and manner were

both unpleasing, was being taken to the dais on which the Duke and Duchess stood, by some one in the German Embassy.

"Who is that?" he said to a young equerry who stood near.

"He is a stranger," said the equerry. "There are many here to-day. If Your Highness wishes I will find out."

"Do," said Sergius.

"It is Prince Alexis Vavarin," he said, coming back almost directly. "He is a brother of Prince Vavarin, who died this spring; but he has not been in Katavia for many years."

Sergius thanked his informant and then joined the other royalties who were near Torquil and Patricia. They were only minor royalties, because the great guns of Europe were not quite pleased with the brothers of Katavia. One had given up the throne to practise medicine: and the other, who was to be crowned this week, had married out of his caste. He had married Patricia Dimsdale, whom he had met when he was travelling incognito in Italy as secretary to Sir Joseph Looper. Patricia was the daughter of a plain English squire, but her mother had been one of those American heiresses whose fortunes make the riches of the Arabian Nights sound paltry; and all her millions she had brought to her husband and to Katavia. She had also brought him great personal charm and beauty. Her marriage had taken place with dramatic suddenness; the old Duke Boris had been asked for his blessing, but no one else had been consulted or even advised. The potentates of Europe and their mandarins behaved much as less exalted people do when a *mésalliance* is suddenly thrust on their notice. Some made the best of it and some did not. Some honoured Patricia for her husband's sake, and when they knew her, for her own. Some slighted her when they had the chance. For instance, Princess

Karl of Gastein, whose husband was an insignificant royalty without a throne, had made herself conspicuously disagreeable. But she had expected to marry Torquil herself, and when Patricia saw the poor plain, unhealthy looking little creature, she wondered at the survival of a superstition that valued blood so degenerate.

"She squints. She is half witted. She is so tyrannical and bad-tempered that no one who can help it will endure her," she said to Torquil.

"But she was a princess of Züringen and her uncle is King of Gothland," Torquil had explained. "We were what they call *ebenbürtig*. You and I were not, my beloved."

"Never mind," said Patricia. "Look at your children!"

As a rule Torquil and Patricia did not mind. They were too busy and too happy to trouble about what the Princess Karl of Gastein and her like said of them. The great ceremony of Coronation had brought difficulties with it, but Torquil had his own mandarins whose pride and pleasure it was to overcome them correctly. The murders at Sarajevo on June 28 had sent a thrill of horror through every Court in Europe and darkened every national horizon. But in spite of the war-cloud Katavia had determined to crown its Duke, whose small country stood outside the Triple Alliance and whose political sympathies were known to be English and Russian. That Germany meant war as soon as possible, and was secretly mobilising, was an open secret amongst the royal and diplomatic people who gathered in the palace at Rudno on this 19th of July 1914. But peace had not been openly broken yet, and a member of the German Legation had presented Alexis Vavarin, not as a gentleman of Katavia, but as an officer in a regiment of German infantry. Torquil and Patricia, as well as the Loopers who were near enough to watch the presentation, had

all taken an instant dislike to him. His manner had a swagger that showed him both arrogant and ill at ease. A man cannot live as Alexis had done for years without carrying signs of his abasement; and his uniform could not make up for his coarse, thickened features and his scowling eyes.

"I want to speak to that man," Sergius said to his brother as soon as he could get a chance. "I should like to speak to him in your presence. Do you understand who he is?"

"He is a Vavarin," said Torquil.

"Why do you want to speak to him, Sergius?" said Patricia. "He looks horrid. I would rather he did not come near us again."

"I shouldn't like to meet him in a lonely place," said Lady Looper. "He'd look like a dangerous criminal if you dressed him in fustian instead of grey cloth and brass buttons."

As she finished speaking Torquil instructed one of his mandarins, who instantly sped through the crowd and returned with Alexis looking sullen and suspicious.

"Are you living at Ora?" said Sergius, when Sandra's uncle had been presented to him.

"I am usually with my regiment in Berlin," said Alexis.

"Are the children of your late brother at Ora?"

Alexis was startled by the Prince's question and showed it. He turned beetroot red.

"They will be there again shortly," he answered with visible hesitation.

"Where are they now?"

"They are travelling with friends of mine."

The Prince looked at him and then said with unmistakable significance—

"I hope they are well and happy. I met them in the forest this spring, and I take an interest in them. The boy looks delicate. He should be carefully

guarded. He is heir to a great name and a great property. In whose hands are the children?"

"In my unworthy ones, Your Highness."

"In yours only?"

"In mine only. Such is the law of Katavia. High and low, we are under the law."

The Prince made a slight sign of dismissal, bowed coldly, and turned his back on Alexis.

"The man lied," he said later in the day when he sat alone with Torquil and Patricia. "His niece is in Rudno. I saw her."

"Why should he lie?" said Torquil, but Patricia saw the unwonted trouble in her brother-in-law's face and listened attentively.

"The girl was in a balcony outside one of Michel's windows. When I saw her in May she was well and happy. To-day she was neither. Her voice is in my ears, for though she only called to her old nurse, if ever I heard a cry for help I heard it then."

"Who is her old nurse?" asked Patricia.

"Her name is Malwina. I suppose she was in the crowd."

"How is it that you know her name?"

"The girl, Alexandra, told me about her."

"Did you see the children often?"

"Only once. The boy had fainted, and I looked after him."

"Did they find out who you were?"

"I did not tell them."

"How old are the children?"

"The boy looked about twelve, and the girl a few years older."

"At that age a few years makes a great difference," said Patricia. "Would you call the girl grown-up?

"She looked any age to-day," said Sergius.

"Is she very pretty?"

"I think so."

"And charming?"

"She charmed me."

"But where has she lived? Where has she been educated?"

"She has lived in the forest. She has been educated by the priest of Ora."

"She told you a great deal in that one meeting, Sergius."

"Yes, she did," said the Prince. "She told me so much that I have thought of her ever since. When you and Torquil first met each other——"

"Oh—we!" cried Patricia. "We knew the moment our eyes met that we—well, that we—how shall I put it? I know you don't like sentiment, Sergius."

"I don't think you need put it any way," said the Prince. "I believe I understand."

"I believe you do," said Patricia, and after reflecting a moment she added, "I hope the priest of Ora is a man of parts. I should like to make his acquaintance. I will ask him to Avlona."

CHAPTER XIII

THE festivities of the Coronation and the great ceremony itself occupied Torquil and Patricia for some days to come. When the foreign guests had departed and the mandarins ceased from troubling they were able to take breath, see something of their own friends, and dine quietly with Prince Sergius, who asked the Loopers and no one else to meet them. This intimate family party agreed, when they were by themselves, that everything had gone off well, and that none, except Princess Karl of Gastein, had been particularly disagreeable.

"She objected to what she called my 'Coronation robes,'" said Patricia, who had chosen to wear a diaphanous golden gown under a train of cloth of gold, embroidered with jewels. "She said that if I considered myself the Duchess of Katavia I ought to have worn the traditional red velvet."

"As she has behaved like that, we will not visit her or ask her here again," said Torquil.

"I should like to spend the rest of the summer quietly at Avlona, and have Sir Joseph and Lady Looper with us," said Patricia. "I know we must pay tiresome official visits in the autumn."

"We may all be in a blaze before the autumn," said Torquil. "The news last night was bad. There is no doubt that Germany is ready. She means to strike first."

"As far as we are concerned she is sure to do that," said Lady Looper cheerfully. "We are never ready."

"But Europe has been on the brink of war for years," said Patricia. "It is always averted at the eleventh hour. I'm not going to worry yet. The last three months have been very tiring, Lady Looper. You have no idea how much trouble I have caused everyone. A man born to a throne ought always to make a political marriage within his own caste. There are people in Katavia who would not acknowledge me if they could help it."

"You could count them on the fingers of one hand," said Torquil.

"That unpleasant person, Prince Alexis Vavarin, had an insufferable manner. He bowed to you, but almost turned his back on me. Afterwards I saw him talking to Princess Karl, and they glanced at me derisively."

"I noticed it," said Sergius.

"He is of no importance," said Torquil.

"It is astonishing how tiresome people of no importance can be sometimes," said Lady Looper.

"What can a man like that do? He has neither position nor property. He is an officer in a third-rate German regiment and lives in Berlin."

"I can't think why you let him in," said Lady Looper.

She was a woman with an impulsive tongue and often addressed the reigning Duke of Katavia as if he were still Mr. Broom, her husband's secretary. Sir Joseph sometimes interposed when he thought his wife's manner had been wanting in deference. He was an excellent man, but inclined to be pompous—and he loved a lord.

"Have you asked Their Highnesses whether they will honour us with a little visit, my dear?" he said now.

"I haven't even told them what we've gone and done," said Lady Looper. "I haven't had the courage."

"What have you done?" said Patricia, preparing to be surprised and amused.

"We are not coming to Avlona for more than a week," said Lady Looper.

"Why not?"

"Your Highness's gracious invitation, which is tantamount to a command——" began Sir Joseph.

"My good Joseph, if you go on like that I shall call her Patsey," interrupted his wife, and then she turned to Patricia.

"I can't stick it, my dear, not for more than a week. If you are not to the manner born, Court life is trumpery. I thought I should love it, but I don't."

"I'm sure you love us," said Torquil, not at all perturbed by the lady's apparent rudeness.

"Not as His Highness the Duke of Katavia," said Lady Looper, paying no attention to her husband's deprecating disapproval. "I was brought up in a strict Nonconformist household, and my father considered all crowned heads anachronisms."

Sir Joseph not only looked uncomfortable but he gave a little cough to stop his wife, and when she went on, moved back his chair and anxiously implored Patricia by his eloquent glances to rise from the table. But she only nodded at him in a friendly way and sat still.

"The people I love are Mr. Broom, Patricia Dimsdale, and Dr. Sergius."

"They are here," said Torquil.

"Yes, they are," said Lady Looper. "This house belongs to Dr. Sergius. He has cleared it of mandarins, male and female. At Avlona I can't even see Patricia and the babies without a fuss, while as for Torquil——"

"His Highness——" suggested Sir Joseph.

"I always address him correctly in public, Joseph," retorted his wife. "I'm not going to speak in that ridiculous way except in public. But what do I see

of Torquil in one of his palaces? He's either busy or surrounded. Therefore, Patricia, I want him to bring you and the children to our castle. Dr. Sergius is warmly invited too."

"I can't go to England just now," said Torquil. "You have no idea how anxious we are. I must be on the spot."

"How I wish we could come!" said Patricia.

"Our castle is not in England," said Lady Looper.

"Where is it?"

"It is in the hills near the frontier of Züringen. The name of it is Stavrotas."

Sergius looked startled and showed it. At least Patricia, whose eyes happened to meet his, saw that he knew the name and felt surprised.

"The castle of Stavrotas belongs to the Lussins," he said.

"I know it does. Prince Lussin has lent it to us. I happened to be talking of our summer plans, and I asked him if there was a quiet corner in the duchy where we could settle down. He offered us this place at once. It used to be so lonely that he hated it, but nowadays a car will take you to Rudno in an hour. I daresay we shall have to rough it. But I don't mind that, do you? There are a few servants."

"We often used to stay at Stavrotas when we were boys," said Torquil. "I remember every path there. Don't you, Sergius?"

"Very well."

"Do let us go," said Patricia.

"Come and talk about it over our coffee," said Torquil, for in Katavia men and women do not separate after dinner as they do in England. Patricia rose and the others followed her to a veranda facing a gay flower garden that ran down to the river and had a fine view of the hills.

"I want to talk to you," Sergius said under his breath to Patricia, and they strolled away together

across the lawn while the others sat down in the veranda.

"I was so uneasy that I went to Hagen," he said, and Patricia knew that Hagen was the chief of police. "He found Malwina for me, the old nurse. I saw her this morning. She knew the driver who took the children from Ora. I have seen him too. Then this afternoon Hagen brought me news. They are at Stavrotas."

"How did he find out?"

"He sent a man to Karadza to inquire. The driver heard some one with them tell a porter they were going there. At Karadza Hagen's emissary found a postman who had actually had the children in his boat and let them go again."

"Why were they in the boat? and why are they at Stavrotas?"

"I'm going to find out. Apparently the postman wouldn't say much. You know what people are when they see a policeman coming. They imagine their own skins are in danger. But Hagen is not a scaremonger, and he says there ought to be inquiries made."

"What did the old nurse say?"

"She is offended and unhappy and she is in the dark. All she can tell you is that Prince Alexis arrived suddenly one day with two strangers who took the children with them next morning, and that after all her years of service she was turned away like a dog. She was not allowed to know where the children were going, and she has never heard from them. But one day she met the driver who had taken them from Ora and he told her about Stavrotas."

"Did she like the people who took the children away?"

"She shakes her head, but she tells you nothing. She can't have seen much of them."

"They may be all right."

"They may be, but I can't forget the girl's face."

"It will be easy to find out more about them if we go to Stavrotas."

"They are on a little island in the midst of the river. I've often landed there."

"When could you go?"

"Any day. The sooner the better."

"Shall we say anything to the Loopers?"

"What is there to say? I've spoken to the children once. They are orphans. We don't like their uncle. He has sent them to Stavrotas. I'm a fool, I suppose, to be uneasy."

"Only we all know that you are not a fool," said Patricia, and then they went back to the veranda.

Three days later the castle of Stavrotas was as full and busy as a hive. The royal children had been left at Avlona, and their parents for the sake of ease came incognito as the Prince and Princess of Rudno. The Duke's private secretary came with him and the necessary servants, but otherwise they were unattended. Messengers and supplies came from Rudno, and there was little intercourse between the castle and the village. But there were whispers in the neighbourhood, and it was soon an open secret that Prince Lussin's friends were entertaining the Duke and Duchess and Prince Sergius. An under-gardener recognised them as they arrived, and half an hour later the news had spread.

"Did you observe how the castle was lighted up last night?" Sirius, the host of the "Eagle" said to the Smithsons.

"Is any one there?" said Dr. Smithson.

"Great people are there," said the host with unction, "the greatest in the land."

"Well, the land isn't much to boast about," said the doctor. "The whole population wouldn't people London."

"Who are at the castle?" said Mrs. Smithson.

"The Duke and Duchess, and him they call

Dr. Sergius. I suppose that even in London you have heard of Dr. Sergius."

"We should like to have our dinner," said Mrs. Smithson in an incisive tone, and the man went off with an offended air.

"It complicates everything," she said to her husband in English, when they were left by themselves.

"We mustn't be seen. We must live on the island till they go."

"We must eat."

"We must hide—or get away."

They were both visibly disturbed and nervous, now brooding, now speaking to each other in their own tongue. Even the host of the "Eagle," who was not a perceptive man, observed that his daily guests were unlike themselves and flurried.

"If you stay here till three, you will see the Duke and Duchess pass," he said. "They must pass the house to get to the river."

"What do they want on the river?" snarled the doctor.

"My nephew Paul and his brother have orders to be ready. The ladies and gentlemen from the castle wish to go on the river this afternoon. Perhaps they will land at the island!"

"Land there!" bawled the doctor, pushing back his chair. "Land on private property! I never heard of such impertinence. The island is mine while I rent it, Sirius, and I permit no one to land there whoever he is. What do you suppose I care about your beggarly little dukes? By all I hear he has to pay his bills with his wife's English money."

"But surely if Their Highnesses wish to honour you——" began the man, and then stopped because Dr. Smithson's overbearing voice and manner checked him.

"You tell Paul not to come near the island," he shouted. "I won't have it."

" Paul will have to obey orders," said the landlord of the " Eagle. " In Katavia the Duke is the Duke, and none of us care in the least about the size of London. His Highness is here. London is not here. For my part I think it is time that some one did land on the island. I am a man who minds his own business, but that is not to say that I am deaf and blind. Besides, Paul knows the postman at Stavrotas, and there are whispers. Take care that the whispers do not become a roar."

CHAPTER XIV

"WHAT are we to do?" said Mrs. Smithson as they rowed back to the island. "They may land and knock at the door. Who is to open it?"

"No one will open it."

"Suppose they hear sounds in the house?"

"Why should they? The boy is in bed. You must keep the girl quiet at the back."

"What will you do if they force their way in and find you?—and find the boy?"

"You're losing your head. What should have aroused their suspicions?"

"I've told you. That little devil screamed across the crowd like a madwoman and Prince Sergius looked at her. That's all I have to go on: a call for help and a glance: but it is something. I believe he has found out that she is here."

"What makes you think he knew her?"

"He was startled. There was recognition. He half rose in his seat as I dragged her away."

"I hope he didn't see you?"

"I wore a thick veil."

"Not that they could do much."

"They could make it unpleasant."

"Have you questioned the girl?"

"Yes. She screamed because she saw her old nurse. She says nothing about Prince Sergius. I have asked her nothing."

"Why not?"

"She may not know him though he recognised her. He may have seen her running wild at Ora. It is

not to our interest to let her think she has a powerful friend."

"Well—this job is nearly done; and then I'm going back to England," said Dr. Smithson. "If there is war there will be work for us."

"Dangerous work."

"Not in England. They live in a fool's paradise."

"War would wake them up."

"Not to suspect any one called Smithson."

"How are you going to make Prince Alexis pay up? He won't if he can possibly help it."

"He has paid half."

"You never told me."

"Why should I tell you?"

"I mean to have my share."

"So you shall, when we get to England. I've sent it there."

"But we must get the other half. He would not give me a penny the other day in Rudno."

"We must go to Berlin," said Dr. Smithson.

"Berlin won't be a healthy place for Smithsons if war breaks out," said his wife.

"It may be. We don't know yet. If I judge my country rightly she'll play her friends false. We should belong to the greatest and noblest of nations then—in Berlin."

"Perhaps you judge your country by yourself," said Mrs. Smithson.

The doctor did not answer, but his brow was scowling as he beached his boat and followed his mate from the landing stage into the house. They were banded together for evil, but they were divided by mutual distrust and dislike, and their lives had not hitherto been prosperous. Both of them now had their thoughts greedily fixed on the money paid by Alexis, and on the large sum still owing. Both wanted to get possession of it, and both knew that the other would prevent this if possible.

"The whole affair has been bungled," Mrs. Smithson said when her husband came within hearing.

"What affair?"

"This. You and your employer have made the mistake men always do make. You thought the girl wouldn't count. But you'll see. She will."

"What can she do?"

"Denounce us. Bear witness."

"Nonsense. She will be married and we shall have vanished."

"She will never consent to the marriage."

"She'll do as she is told."

"She would be more likely to if you treated her differently. We were misled. We were told that she was a peasant, almost an animal, and that she could be tamed by blows. I always knew that man was a stupid, boasting brute. We ought to have conciliated her and thrown sand in her eyes. Even now you might let the boy be in her room and let her nurse him. You know it is too late, but she doesn't."

"What are you going to do this afternoon? We'll settle that first."

"We must all keep out of the way."

"How are you going to manage it?"

"Will you leave it to me?"

A low growl of assent was all Mrs. Smithson looked for, and directly she got inside the house she acted. On the ground floor she locked the front and the back doors, bolted the windows, and where there were blinds drew them. Then she went upstairs. Her husband's door stood open, and so did the door of the cupboard room in which Philip had been lying day and night lately. She looked in and retreated swiftly because its air was noisome even now that the door stood ajar. But she had seen that the bed was empty. She instantly went across the passage to Sandra's room and opened the door. Here, as she

expected, she found the boy lying in bed, while his sister sat beside him anxious and sorrowful.

"What does this mean?" said Mrs. Smithson.

"I have carried him in here," said Sandra.

"Why?"

"He could not breathe in that den. He was suffering horribly. Why don't you kill him outright? While we were away——"

The girl's voice failed and broke. The thought of what Philip had endured while she was in Rudno moved her beyond speech, for he had been callously neglected. The doctor had left him to die like a lost and wounded bird, of thirst and inanition.

"Well!" said Mrs. Smithson. "What happened while we were away?"

"No one went near him. For two nights and two days no one went near him. He was only just alive when I got back."

"Who told you no one went near him?"

"Philip himself."

"The poor boy raves," said Mrs. Smithson coldly. "I know he was very ill while we were away. My husband told me so directly. He was with your brother day and night. But there was high fever, and then you get hallucinations. One cannot expect you to understand this, but it is true."

"Some of what you say is true and some is not," said Sandra.

At that moment the doctor entered the room and spoke to his wife in English. She answered, and then turned to Sandra.

"Come with me," she said: and as the girl hesitated, the doctor seized her by the arm, pushed her out of the room, across the passage and into Philip's cell, which he locked.

"Now they may come," said Mrs. Smithson.

"I suppose that girl might make a noise they could hear. If she screams or hammers on the door——"

"Why should she? She doesn't know they are coming, and in there she can't hear them."

"She might," said the doctor.

"Can't you give her something to keep her quiet?"

The doctor said he could if it was worth while, but he argued as to whether it was worth while, and he was still arguing when his wife hushed him with a listening eye and an uplifted hand.

"I hear them," she said.

The blinds of both front rooms had been drawn down, but without any danger of being seen she could peep behind one: and she did so now.

"Patricia!" she said in a low, malevolent voice. "Mr. Broom, Prince Sergius, the Loopers. What are the Loopers doing here? That woman is as persistent as a bluebottle and as inquisitive as a terrier."

"I'll go across and keep the boy quiet," said the doctor. "If he hears a voice he knows——"

"You mean Prince Sergius? I doubt if he knows it."

"I think I'll go," said the doctor, and he stole out of the room softly, like a cat.

Sandra, meanwhile, had thrown herself on Philip's bed, enduring what he had endured. The foul air made her feel sick and suffocated, but she lay there listening in fear, listening for sounds from her brother's room. The house was as silent as a grave, and no one seemed to stir in it. Perhaps when she was allowed to see Philip again he would be dead. She could not believe, she could hardly hope, that he had long to live. Her head reeled in here and her breath struggled for air. She saw Philip in the forest of Ora, thoughtful beyond his years, grey-eyed, delicate, carefully guarded. What was it that wicked woman had told her—meaning to humiliate and wound? Philip was not a Vavarin. His mother, Sandra's mother, had been a wanton. Philip had no right to his father's name or his father's possessions.

But how little Sandra cared about the matter and how faintly she understood its import. Her father and mother were shadows accompanying her infancy, hardly remembered. What did their misdeeds or even their misfortunes signify in comparison with the cup of sorrow that Philip, whom she passionately loved, was drinking to the dregs? She felt one bruise on his body more vividly than all the sorrows of mankind.

Suddenly she sat up and listened. Surely there were voices outside the house. There were sharp insistent knocks at the front door. As they ceased she heard careful, stealthy sounds in the doctor's room. Without counting the cost to herself she hammered loudly on her door and screamed for help as she had screamed across the crowd to Malwina at the top of her voice. Whether she could be heard outside the house she did not know, but she did her best. No one answered her and no one tried to stop her. Within the house, when she ceased to call, the silence of the grave prevailed. Outside she still heard voices, but they were fainter, and before long ceased entirely. Then the door of the cell was thrown open and the doctor stood there, threatening.

"What does this mean?" he said.

Sandra shrank back from him both defiant and afraid. She expected to be beaten.

"What are you making this fuss about? Do you think you are going to take the law into your own hands and not be punished?"

"I can't breathe in here."

"Nonsense!"

"I want to be with Philip."

"If you make that noise again you'll stay here a week," said the doctor. "If you behave yourself you'll be let out in half an hour. We have decided to leave Philip in your room. If he gets worse you may bear the blame. You moved him!"

Before the girl could answer he shut the door on her and turned the key.

"They are still on the island," he said in a low voice to Mrs. Smithson. "When their boats go we will let her out. But to-morrow at latest we must get away. I won't risk meeting them on their own ground."

"How can we travel with the boy in such a state?"

"I don't propose to take him with us."

"Oh!"

The woman looked away but raised no objection.

"I suppose the girl must come," she said.

"Of course. Vavarin wants her: and we want our money from him. We must go straight to Berlin."

"She may give trouble on the way."

"I'll see to that. You get yourselves ready."

Meanwhile the party from the castle were making inquiries at the village inn, and what they learned there was far from satisfying. Yes, the house was inhabited, the landlord said, and had been for three months. What was going on no one knew, but a boy and girl, who never came across the water, were interned there. They had been seen by various people, but no one had spoken to them. One or two, more curious than their neighbours, had tried, but at first when the children had been allowed outside by themselves no one had been suspicious, and later on they were never seen without one of the foreigners in charge of them. These two people ate at the inn three times a day and paid good money. They carried back small quantities of food in the boat with them: nothing much.

"Then how have the children been fed?" asked Lady Looper.

"That is what I have often asked myself," said the host.

"If you'd gone to Rudno and informed the police you'd have been more use," said the lady.

"I suppose they have had fires for cooking? You will have seen the smoke?" said Prince Sergius.

"Occasionally there has been a little smoke," the man answered. "Not often."

"Do you know anything about their attempt to escape last week?" said Torquil.

"I would not get my cousin, the postman, into trouble."

"You won't," said Torquil, "but you'll get yourself into trouble if you don't answer my question."

"Your Highness, I wish to answer. Undoubtedly the children tried to escape in my cousin's boat. Undoubtedly the boy's body bore marks of ill-treatment."

"Ah!" said Patricia.

"Your cousin did not admit that when the police questioned him," said Torquil. "Why did he give the children up?"

"The foreign doctor threatened him."

"A doctor?" said Lady Looper. "What's his name?"

"Here is his name," said Sirius, and he produced some letters that had come by post that morning for the Smithsons.

"H—ph!" said Lady Looper turning them over, holding them to the light, looking as if her fingers ached to open them. "Smithson! What's in a name! Mr. Broom?"

"Miladi!"

"Will Your Highness permit me to ask this dolt some questions?"

"Why not, Miladi? What do you think he can tell you?"

"I've no idea. I've no clue. I just want to ask idle questions."

"My dear, we know all that there is to know," said Sir Joseph. "If there is anything wrong His Highness's police——"

"Don't worry me, Joseph," said Lady Looper. "I want to talk to the landlord. Tell me, my good man, what are these people on the island like, these two foreigners whom you have seen three times a day for three months? Surely you know every hair on their heads, surely you can describe them?"

"But, of course, I can describe them," said Sirius. "What is it that you would know?"

"I would have you paint their portraits for us, in a few words."

"In a few words it is not possible to paint portraits. They are English, they pay good money, they are evidently persons of education. The husband is a doctor and gave me a bottle when I was upset by the heat——"

"See here," said Lady Looper, rapping on the table impatiently. "Just answer my questions. Is the man tall or short?"

"Rather short: if you would call me short."

"I would. Is he thin or stout?"

"About half my size."

"He might still be stout," murmured the lady in English and then resumed her questions. "Has he a beard?"

"He has no beard. He is sallow and he has smooth fat cheeks like this."

"Ah!" said Patricia again, for Sirius had puffed his cheeks out on either side in order to convey an idea of Dr. Smithson.

"The wife has red hair and scarlet lips, as scarlet as poppies," said Lady Looper, seizing the likeness and challenging the others with her glance. They had crowded close to her and were listening with growing attention to what she asked and what Sirius answered.

"You know her then?" he said, his sluggish gaze expressing a mild surprise.

"What shall I say?" she asked in English and looked at Torquil.

"What do you mean?" said he.

"Surely they would never dare to come to Katavia," said Patricia.

"They have been here three months and no one has guessed at them," said Lady Looper.

"Do you really suppose that Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas are on that island under the name of Smithson?" said Sir Joseph incredulously.

"I think we ought to find out who is there," said Lady Looper.

"That shall be done," said Torquil.

CHAPTER XV

SERGIUS could not sleep. He could not wait. What compound of pity, love, and fear moved him he did not analyse. What measure of knowledge he acted on he did not stop to think. Lady Looper had drawn her bow at a venture.

"We knew the two people with the children were English," she said. "We knew they were a doctor and his wife. Sirius may be a dolt, but he is a mimic, a good mimic. He stood like Dr. Pratt, he pushed up his lip at one corner like him; when I described Miss Jonas he recognised her. They call themselves Smithson now."

"I wonder why," said Patricia.

"They have probably had more than one *alias* since they tried to murder you," said Torquil.

"Have you power to arrest them?" said Lady Looper.

"I've instructed Hagen to do so to-morrow morning, Miladi."

"Meanwhile the children may be finished or abducted," said Sergius.

"We heard sounds," said his brother. "They have been there three months."

"But while we were on the island they stood behind drawn blinds recognising us. Will they wait there for Hagen? At this moment they may be getting away."

"I have told Sirius that he is to watch and prevent that."

"I am not easy about what is going on there,"

said Sergius. "The boy is heir of Ora. If he were to die his uncle would inherit. On the island there may be Dr. Pratt."

"I could not get Hagen to-night," said Torquil. "He is not in Rudno. He is away on public business."

"We must get hold of both the children to-morrow and keep them with us," said Patricia. "Can we do that, Torquil?"

"We certainly will," he answered.

But Sergius could not sleep. Sandra's face haunted him, and so did the veiled woman near her, whose face he had not seen. Her height, her lean shoulders, and the swift strength of movement with which she had pulled the girl away were all part of a memory. He could not rest till he had found out for certain who was on the island and what was happening to the children in custody there.

At two o'clock, when he knew that a white night lay in front of him, he got up and looked out of his windows. He saw the scattered roofs of the village, the church tower with its big stork's nest, the shining river and the little island in its midst; all plain in the bright light of a full moon and myriads of stars. He saw the high white road winding out of sight with a turn of the river and the pastures that bordered it. The air was fresh and scented with the forest. The world was asleep, the night was fine and still. He dressed quickly, went through the silent house like a thief, and, instead of opening the heavy bolts of the front door, let himself out of a French window giving on the garden. He took neither weapons nor medicine with him, for he went without plan, driven by his restlessness. The path he took led through the forest and then through fields of ripe corn ready this week or the next for the harvest. The peace and beauty of the night entered into the young man's spirit, but hardly calmed it. He walked hastily, and when he

got to the village made straight for the castle boat-house, which was near the landing stage used by the island. He risked waking some one in the village when he unlocked the boat-house door, but no one seemed to wake except a dog who barked for a moment and then was silent. The plash of the oars in the water sounded through the night, and so did the grating of his boat when he beached it on the island. But no sign from the silent house disturbed him: and as he looked up at the shuttered windows he thought that he had come on a fool's errand and might as well go back again. For what could he expect to see in a house asleep for the night, and how could he hope to help any one in danger there? For some time he stood beneath the windows facing the river and listened in vain for sounds of wakefulness. Then he walked cautiously round to the back and saw that here too the rooms were unlighted, but that in one a window stood open. He stood opposite to it and before long heard a cough, the quality of which he understood. The boy then was there—very ill undoubtedly, but still alive.

Sergius was looking up at the house now and the moonlight fell on his face. It fell too on the face of the girl he had seen in the forest and at Rudno, when she came close to the open window, attracted perhaps by some slight unexplained sound outside. He saw her start of surprise, he heard the low cry she gave when she saw him, and the next moment she was leaning out of the window to speak to him.

"You!" she said. "Did you know we were here?"

"Yes, I knew."

"But who told you?"

"It's a roundabout story. I found Malwina."

"Can you help us to get away?"

"Do you want to get away?"

"Come nearer," she said. "No one must hear us."

She leaned so far out of the window now that he feared she would fall, and he went close beneath it so as to listen to her whisper.

"My brother is very ill," she said. "He may die unless he is taken away."

"Can I see him? Can you let me in?"

"No. Our door is locked outside."

"Is the key in the lock?"

"I think so."

"Then I'll try to get in by a lower window."

"Is it safe? Suppose they hear you?"

Sergius laughed and moved away. Sandra could see him examining the lower windows at the back of the house which she knew had poor worn-out fastenings. She was not surprised to hear one crash in as if with the weight of his arm, but the noise he made resounded through the house and she listened in terror for what should happen next. She thought she heard some one stir in Mrs. Smithson's room, but no door was opened, and after listening in breathless suspense she heard some one come quietly up the stairs. Then the key turned in the lock and Sergius stood on the threshold. The moonlight flooded the room so that she saw his face as plainly as she had seen it in the forest, and she went towards him, her eyes shining with hope and welcome. But her first words and her thoughts were for Philip.

"He doesn't know me," she said. "He is much worse."

"Haven't you a light?" he said going close to the boy's bedside.

"No," she whispered.

"Can you get one?"

"I can get the lamp they use in their room downstairs. But what will happen if we wake them?"

"Nothing. I must have more light."

He was bending over Philip now, listening, his hand on the boy's pulse, his air grave and attentive.

She left him, crept down the creaking stairs, found the lamp and carried it back. There was no table in the room to set it on and not even a chair. There was nothing but the bed in which the boy lay and the trunk that Sandra had brought from Ora. Sergius took the lamp from her, set it on the floor, and looked round the room.

"How long has this been going on?" he asked.

"Do you remember the day we met you in the forest?"

"Very well. It was in May."

"When we got home we found my uncle and the Smithsons there. Next day we were brought here."

"Three months! Poor children!"

"Will Philip die? Is he dying?"

The girl's eyes hung on his, and Sergius could not answer them hopefully.

"We must get him away," he said.

"Now—this moment?"

"Early to-morrow. I will bring a car."

"They won't let you in."

"I shall come in—and take you both away. I would take you now, but he could not bear the journey in my arms. A car gets up to the castle in twenty minutes."

He believed that if he tried to carry the boy in the boat and then uphill to the castle he would never get him there alive. He believed he was unlikely to find him alive next morning, but he meant to come and carry away the girl.

"The castle!" said Sandra. "Are you staying there?"

The young man looked at her and remembered the legends that had grown up around the children of Ora, the stories of their seclusion, and the neglected youth. She was probably the only girl of her age in the duchy who did not know his lineaments.

"Yes: I am staying there with friends," he said.

"So are my brother and his wife. They are going to take care of you."

"But my uncle is our guardian. He has power over us."

"We shall see what defence he makes. He has left you here since May—with these persons. Them we shall arrest to-morrow. If we can prove ill-treatment——"

The girl's mouth quivered.

"Mrs. Smithson and I were away three days when the Duke was crowned in Rudno," she said. "All that time he lay without food or help in a cell that has neither light nor air. The doctor did not open his door once. When I got back he did not know me. He frightened me. To-day I carried him in here."

"He has been beaten too."

"He has been brutally beaten and starved for three months."

"Does your uncle know what has gone on?"

"He knows. He would be Prince Vavarin. In Rudno I saw him and told him. Then I knew that it was his doing. He has had Philip murdered and he has said that I shall marry him."

"Damnation!" said Sergius: and with that inappropriate word, with his movement towards her and the light of his eyes he showed his heart to the astonished girl. Had love come to her to-night, and come in this hour of heavy dread and sorrow? The flutter of love's wings and the promise of his guard stirred her when Sergius bent over Philip again. She moved nearer to the bed and watched trustfully.

"I won't wait till the morning," said Sergius. "He must be moved at once. I'll go straight back now and get a car."

"Will it take long?"

"Under two hours. I'll walk as quick as I can, but it is a pull."

He stopped short, startled by a slight sound at the door: and looked round to see it ajar. He was there in a moment and saw no one: but he heard a step and another door softly closed.

"One of them is awake," he said.

"Mrs. Smithson! That was her door," said Sandra, looking anxious.

"I shall be back soon," he promised her: but he saw that she was not reassured. He reflected a moment and then he said—

"Go and tell Mrs. Smithson to come and speak to me."

His tone was new to Sandra, and she heard it with some surprise. Her friend of the forest could assume an air of command that she had not guessed at, and she obeyed him without hesitation. But as she knocked at Mrs. Smithson's door she remembered that she did not know his name.

"What do you want?" Mrs. Smithson asked without opening the door.

"Will you please come into the next room?" said Sandra.

There was no answer: so she repeated her request in a louder voice. On that the door opened and Mrs. Smithson stood in the darkness, unrecognisable except by her voice.

"How dare you disturb me in the middle of the night?" she said, but as she spoke the light of the lamp in Sergius's hand revealed her. He came from the adjoining room carrying it.

"But you are up and dressed," cried Sandra.

"So it is you," said Sergius. "Lady Looper was right."

"Who are you?" said Mrs. Smithson insolently.

"You know very well who I am," the young man said, with the curious quiet dignity that seemed to Sandra to express itself in a lower tone and yet to be more sure of itself than any human quality she

had yet met in the world. "You know me as well as I know you."

"I have never seen you before," asserted Mrs. Smithson. "You have stolen into the house like a thief. What are you doing in this girl's room?"

"I have one thing to say to you," Sergius answered. "If you molest these children again, if you or the man with you even speak to them it is at your peril. The law of the duchy shall deal with you, and I shall make it my pleasure to see that it deals with you both faithfully."

"Your laws cannot touch us. We are English subjects and we have done no wrong," said Mrs. Smithson.

"What is all this?" cried a fussy, blustering voice from the opposite doorway, and Sandra saw that Dr. Smithson had been roused and stood there in a dressing-gown. She saw him appear without suspicion or alarm: and she saw him turn as white as a sheet when he beheld Sergius.

"Your Highness——here," he stuttered.

Sergius, who had set down the lamp on a window ledge in the passage, looked at him impassively.

"So you remember me, Dr. Pratt," he said.

"Of course I remember Your Highness," said the doctor obsequiously, and then he met his wife's viperish glance of impatience and denial. "I mean that I recognise Your Highness by your portraits," he said hurriedly. "It is impossible that you should ever have seen me before. My name is Smithson."

The Prince turned his back on him.

"I have given my orders. You can transmit them," he said to Mrs. Smithson: and then he took the key from the lock in Sandra's room, signed to her to go in, and told her to lock it inside.

"You will come soon?" she murmured.

The look with which he answered her was half a promise and half a rebuke. He hoped the Smithsons

or Pratts did not hear what she said, but he could not feel sure. When he had heard the key turn in the lock he went downstairs and out of the house by the front door. The doctor and his wife watched him sullenly and then in the doctor's bedroom faced each other in dismay.

CHAPTER XVI

FROM the village it was an hour and a half's quick walk to the castle, every yard of it uphill. When Sergius got back the first lights of dawn were in the sky, but within the house it was dark and no one was stirring yet. He knew where Dmitri, his own man, slept, and sent him hurrying to the outdoor quarters with a message to his chauffeur. Then he got hold of Pogson, the Englishwoman, who had waited on Patricia when she was Miss Dimsdale, and always travelled with her now. She was still wizen and starved-looking, though she often wrote home to say she was living in the lap of luxury and was putting by a tidy bit for her old age. She adored the ground Prince Sergius trod on, and he could trust her to fulfil his commands without cavil or surprise.

"I want two bedrooms got ready at once," he said when she arrived.

"Yes, Yer 'Ighness. I will inform the 'ousekeeper," she said.

"Why inform any one at four o'clock in the morning? Can't you get them ready yourself?"

"Undoubtedly, Yer 'Ighness. I knows the linen room and knows where the key is. But it would not be regular."

"Anything is regular that I order."

"So I suppose, Yer 'Ighness. I'll do it, even if I 'ave words with the 'ousekeeper."

"Where are the best unoccupied rooms? Are they far from my room?"

"There are no unoccupied rooms on your floor, Yer 'Ighness. I passed the remark to Mr. Dmitri only yesterday that for a castle I call this place small. In England we should hardly say it was a mansion."

"But there are rooms on the floor above."

"Yes. There are good rooms on the floor above."

"Then get two ready. The young lady——"

"A young lady!"

"Yes. A young lady and her brother. The boy is very ill."

"Pore young gentleman! Am I to 'ave rooms ready for their attendants too, Yer 'Ighness?"

"Not at present. Can you have some hot *consommé* ready for me in an hour, Pogson, and fires in the two bedrooms? I'm afraid you won't get much more sleep to-night."

"That don't matter, Yer 'Ighness."

"I'm taking Dmitri with me. Can you manage without him?"

"I should 'ope so. Mr. Dmitri isn't no 'ousemaid. 'E'd be no good to me at all."

Sergius heard his car come from the garage as Pogson spoke and hurried out of the house. In ten minutes he had reached Stavrotas, and in five minutes he and Dmitri were in the boat and on their way to the island. The night had passed. The moon sailed faintly in a clear summer sky.

"Their boat has gone," he cried suddenly to Dmitri. "It was here two hours ago."

The man stared at the empty beach and said nothing. He had not heard much about the island, and did not know why his master had roused him at four o'clock to come here. Sergius said nothing at the moment to explain his evident hurry and perturbation. He sprang from the boat, tore in hot haste to the house, found doors and windows closed, but got in as he had done before by the window he

had broken. But then he found he could not go straight upstairs because the door of the back room or kitchen in which he stood had been locked outside. Dmitri, who had followed him round the house, looked helplessly in at the window and said he could not squeeze through. He was as tall as his master and at least three times as stout.

"We must break in a door, the quicker the better," said Sergius. "You try the front one and I'll try this."

Dmitri was not the man to reason why when Dr. Sergius gave the word. It was certainly a strange affair. Dmitri was a highly respectable married man, who had never broken the smallest police regulation in his life, and he did not like breaking into a house by force. He considered it destructive and dangerous. The Prince did not say who might be inside and whether they were likely to defend themselves: nevertheless what the Prince said always had to be done as quickly and efficiently as possible. There was a noise both back and front of crashing blows, and then, in front, of yielding wood. Dmitri appeared again at the back of the house, heated and tousled, but pleased with himself.

"The door is open, Your Highness," he said.

"We made noise enough to wake the dead," observed Sergius as he climbed out of the window.

"There seems to be no one in the house," said Dmitri.

Sergius tore up the stairs and found, as he expected, that the door of Sandra's room was locked outside. But he could get no answer from any one inside, nor could he hear any one move there. He looked at Dmitri.

"Your Highness wishes to get in?" said the man.

"I cannot understand what has happened," said

Sergius. "I left two people locked in that room: a young lady and a boy who is very ill."

The man put his ear close to the keyhole and listened with strained attention.

"Some one is there still," he said. "I heard some one move."

Sergius hesitated.

"Wait here," he said; "I will see if I can get in at the window."

He ran downstairs with all the devils of fear and mystification urging him on. What had happened to Sandra? Why did she not speak? What had become of the doctor and his wife? These locked doors were wasting precious time, and they would get away as they had got away once before in Rome. If they had left the children behind he did not much care. The police could be trusted to hunt them down at their leisure. But if they had Sandra with them—Sandra, who had been left locked up in her room! Sergius snatched a chair from the kitchen as he went past, and as he carried it he noticed that there were fresh damp footmarks on it, such as he would make himself now if he stood on it after walking through the loose, dewy gravel of the path around the house. When he got to the back windows he found that with the help of the chair he could get his foot on to the branch of a tree, and from there, if the upper window had been open, he might have climbed without difficulty into the room he wanted.

But every window was tight shut.

"Then we must break the door," he said to himself, and tore back again to Dmitri.

"Both together," he said, and they charged the door with their united strength. It gave suddenly at the impact and they tumbled over each other inside the room. Sergius was on his feet first. He had seen, even as he fell, that Sandra was not there. The boy lay on her bed quite unconscious, but not

quite still. His movements were weaker than they had been two hours ago, but he was alive.

"Search the house and bring me word," the Prince said to Dmitri, and while the man went about this business his master fed the dying boy with milk and brandy that he had brought with him, wrapped him in blankets and carried him downstairs.

"There is no one in the house, and there is no one on the island," Dmitri reported. "I have hunted everywhere."

"Carry the boy slowly and carefully to the boat," said Sergius. "I want to look at the house myself."

He walked through it hastily and noted its wretchedness. There was not a carpet anywhere, or a wardrobe, or a chest of drawers. Plainly it had been unfurnished until the little there was had been sent there for a special purpose three months ago. Everything looked new and of the commonest quality. In Mrs. Smithson's room there was great disorder. She had packed in a hurry and left a good deal behind. Sandra's trunk stood where it had been when he set the lamp there two hours ago. In the doctor's room, too, there were signs of hasty departure and some bottles on the table containing drugs. Sergius looked at these and found that they contained strong soporifics.

Then he opened the door of the *Kammer* and looked in. The neglected bed with its foul linen remained as Sandra had left it the night before. The morning light streamed into the den, revealing its want of air and its nakedness. There was no furniture except the dirty, comfortless bed; and here the boy with his sick lungs had been left to die unfed and untended. Sergius had a face of stone when he went downstairs.

In the boat he held Philip in his arms while Dmitri rowed. By the time they landed the village was awake and some of the villagers stood a little way off watching the Prince's car.

"It is Dr. Sergius," said one.

"He brings the boy from the island," said another.

"Find out if any one saw the boat leave the island with three people in it," Sergius bade Dmitri, while he settled himself in the car with Philip.

"They say Sirius saw them leave nearly two hours ago, and that he hopes they mean to come back because they owe him a week's money," Dmitri reported. "They went down stream towards Züringen."

Sergius made no comment and signed to his chauffeur to start. There was nothing to be done from this village, that had neither post nor telephone. An hour's hard rowing would have taken the boat to the frontier and from there it was easy to get on by train. The Züringen officials must be questioned by the Rudno police.

Pogson waited in front of the castle, and when the car stopped took the boy from the Prince's arms.

"Put him to bed," Sergius told her. "I'll be with you in five minutes. I have to speak to some one on the telephone. Dmitri will help you."

"What about the young lady?" Pogson asked of Dmitri. "'Is 'Ighness said as 'ow a young lady was comin'."

"We have seen no young ladies," said Dmitri. "The house was empty."

"'E looks bad," said Pogson. "My word, 'e looks bad. Where's 'e been to get like this?"

They had reached the warm, airy room prepared for the boy and had unwrapped the blanket that hid his condition.

"We got to wash 'im," said Pogson. "We can't put that into no purple and fine linen."

Then, when they tenderly undressed him they saw his starved body and the wicked-looking, unhealed stripes on his back.

"I 'old with them Bible Jews," said Pogson,

looking up at Dr. Sergius who had come in and stood near watching their ministrations. "I've no use for the Christian religion when I see a case like this. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is what I would deal them and feel better for it! 'Oo is the boy, Mr. Dmitri, and 'oo 'as murdered him?"

She asked her question in a whisper because after two years spent at Court she knew that it was not correct to interrogate royal personages. But she knew that Sergius could hear, and she was not surprised when he answered. She had never acquired the official manners, and the three highest people in the land never seemed to mind.

"The boy is Prince Vavarin," said Sergius. "The people who have been ill-treating him call themselves Smithson now, Dr. and Mrs. Smithson, but you once knew them under different names."

He turned to Patricia and Lady Looper, who had been roused by the commotion in and out of the house, and came to see the patient brought by Sergius from the island.

"You were right," he said to Lady Looper, "the people with the children were Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas. I saw them both."

"Sakes alive!" cried Pogson.

"How dare they venture into Katavia?" said Patricia, looking up from the bedside.

"They were hidden on the island under an *alias*. They could not guess that we should come to Stavrotas."

"I should like to see them again," said Lady Looper vindictively. "I should like to have a few words with them."

"Hagen is after them by this time," said Sergius. "But they are over the border long ago. They went down stream."

"Who is this poor boy?" asked Lady Looper.

"He is Prince Vavarin."

"'E would 'ave been better a beggar in the streets," said Pogson. "Some one must 'ave 'ad a down on 'im."

"Yes," said Lady Looper, "some one must have wanted him out of the way. That's plain. Can you pull him round, Dr. Sergius?"

"I don't think so," said Sergius, "but I'm going to try. Can you spare Pogson for a few hours? I've sent for nurses, but they won't be here till this afternoon. Lady Looper, I am your guest, and I am giving orders in your house——"

Lady Looper made a beautiful stage curtsey. "Everything we have is at Your Highness's service," she said. "Is it not so, Joseph?"

Her husband, who had just come in with Torquil, looked disturbed and anxious. So did the Duke.

"The news is very bad," said Sir Joseph. "Germany is mobilising as fast as she can."

"But no one is at war," cried Lady Looper.

"She is, and that's the mischief."

"We are neutral," said Torquil, reassuring his wife. "But we shall go through an anxious time."

"Is the neutrality of a small state sure to be respected by a big one?" said Patricia.

"I'm not going to make any promises for Germany," said Torquil. "I don't trust her. She will trample on anything in her way. But she won't trample on Katavia. We shall mobilise at once and our mountains will do the rest."

"How and when did you get this news?" said Sergius to his brother.

"Just now by 'phone from Bertholdsruhe."

"If Züringen is mobilising the trains will be crowded and in confusion."

"No doubt."

"Torquil has not been told yet," said Patricia, and turned to her husband. "Sergius has seen Dr. Pratt and Miss Jonas again. They were on the island

with this poor boy and his sister: but they have got away again into Züringen. Sergius has told Hagen to find them."

"I suppose the boy's sister is with them," said Lady Looper.

"Yes," said Sergius, and allowed his eyes to meet Patricia's. "She is with them."

CHAPTER XVII

SANDRA woke up to the sound of electric cars, now waning, now close by, but continuously in her ears. She woke with a dry tongue and a heavy head in a room that was strange to her. Compared with her room on the island it was luxurious. It had a sofa, a chair, a low chest of drawers with a jug and basin on the top, and a small cracked mirror behind. None of these things had she ever seen before. She tried to understand where she was and what had happened to her, but she was not completely awake yet. Memory came and faded away again into an uneasy doze. She saw Sergius facing the Smithsons, without personal anger, but as implacable as steel. She saw Philip lying nearer death than life, unable to listen or answer when she spoke to him. She woke with a shriek of fright, because the horrible moment came back when a sound at the window startled her and she had looked round to see Dr. Smithson inside the room. She had rushed to the door to open it, but the key jibbed in the rusty lock. The man and girl had struggled for its possession and the girl had succumbed. He had opened the door, pushed her across the threshold, locked the door outside and put the key in his pocket. Then in his own room he and his wife made her drink from a medicine glass they had ready.

After that Sandra could not remember clearly. Yet she did remember a boat and then a carriage and then a train in which she had slept, and sometimes half-waked and then slept again heavily with aching

eyes and head: just as she slept now, against her reason and her will. She wanted to be wide awake and find out what had happened to Philip, and whether he was dead or alive. The thought of Philip began to pierce through her drowsiness and help her to throw it off. With an immense effort she sat up in bed and pulled back the window curtains nearest to her so as to let in more light. The rings rattled on the poles and must have sounded in the next room, for as Sandra looked stupidly at her strange surroundings Mrs. Smithson came in through an adjoining door.

"So you are awake at last!" she said.

"What day is this?" asked Sandra.

"Monday."

"Where am I?"

"In Berlin."

"Where is Philip?"

"He died before we left the island."

Sandra sank back upon her pillow—believing, disbelieving, desolate. Her head ached, her heart was heavy within her. If Philip had died she did not care to live.

"You must get up at once," said Mrs. Smithson. "Your uncle will be here directly and will expect to see you."

"I will not see him."

"You'll do as you are told. If you are not ready in a quarter of an hour I shall bring him in here."

Sandra's first movement when Mrs. Smithson left her was to secure both doors of her room, and she found without surprise that she could lock one but not the other. So, as Mrs. Smithson prophesied, she did as she was told and languidly dressed herself. Evidently some one had been in and out while she slept, for she found that the wretched clothes she wore on the island were gone. They had been exchanged for some she had seen last in the shop at Rudno.

"How did they get here?" she asked, directly Mrs. Smithson opened the door again.

"They were sent here by my orders."

Sandra frowned at her own image in the glass, frowned in puzzlement and desolation. Mrs. Smithson had taken up the comb and was arranging her hair in a way that made her look grown-up. Her eyes were still heavy and her face pale, but when she had put on the new gown from Rudno she saw some of her own possibilities as she had never seen them before. She turned from the glass miserably.

"Have you told him that Philip is dead?" she said.

Before Mrs. Smithson could answer the outer door of the adjoining room was heard to open violently, and a man, trailing his sword, clattered across the uncarpeted floor.

"You tell me the boy is dead," Sandra heard him say in a loud voice. "How am I to know that you are not lying? Why didn't you stay till he was buried?"

She went into the room before Mrs. Smithson could stop her, and saw that her uncle was standing a-straddle beside Dr. Smithson, whose face was suffused with anger, uneasiness, and dislike.

"I was not going to wait in that accursed place another hour," the doctor said. "We've brought you the girl and we leave Berlin to-night."

"If you can!" laughed Alexis. "If you can. Berlin may not be wholesome for people of your nationality by to-night."

"We have kept our bargain. Are you going to keep yours?"

"We'll see. We'll see. Why, here she is, the little bride, in deep mourning. Whose doing is that?"

Alexis turned scowling to Mrs. Smithson, while he seized Sandra's wrist and looked at her from head to foot appraisingly, not without approval.

"Her father died in April. Her brother died two days ago. Would you dress her in scarlet?" said Mrs. Smithson.

"Not in scarlet. In white, gracious lady, in white. She has lost a father and a brother, but she has gained a lover and a man. Little one, I kiss thy hand."

He actually bent over Sandra's hand and brushed it with his moustache in spite of her frightened attempt to draw it away. Then he let it go and questioned her in his usual harsh, domineering way.

"Did you see the boy die?" he said.

"No," said Sandra. "He was very ill, but he was not dead."

"He had not two hours to live," said Dr. Smithson.

"So you say," sneered Alexis. "However, we will dine together to-night. To-morrow we will have a wedding; and on Wednesday I go—to Paris——"

"To Paris!" said Mrs. Smithson.

"On Sedan Day our invincible army will dine in Paris," said Alexis. "A fortnight later we shall occupy the palace of your Lord Mayor. Is it your intention to be in London to receive us?"

"I suppose that if we remain neutral the palace of the Lord Mayor is safe?" she suggested.

He twirled his upstanding moustaches and took the hilt of his sword into his hand.

"A little sooner! A little later!" he assured her. "Your turn will come. You are the enemy. The rest are rubbish!"

"Oh, confound your politics!" put in the doctor. "We are not patriots. What do I owe my country? What do I care who is in London as long as I can't prosper there? You may do your worst in England when I'm out of it. I've had enough of Europe, and of Europeans. I want my dues and then I'm going."

Sandra had sat down in a corner of the sofa, because her knees felt weak and her head dizzy still. She listened to the three older people talking as you

listen to voices when you are on the border-land of slumber: and it was with an effort that she now joined in.

"What is it that you say about a wedding?" she asked.

Alexis went up to the sofa at once and sat down beside her.

"To-morrow, little treasure, we shall be married, you and I," he said, watching her. "I have arranged everything. You will be Princess Vavarin. If you wish, while I am at the war, you shall live at Ora with your old nurse."

"Can you have a marriage without a lawyer or a priest?" said Sandra, who had seen village marriages celebrated with the assistance of the civil and the church officials.

"We shall have all that is necessary," said Alexis, still watching her.

"You would marry me to-morrow although my brother——is not buried yet?"

"My country calls me," said Alexis pompously. "Before I go and risk my life for my country I wish to give you my name and my possessions. I may never come back."

Sandra sat very still, a wobegone little figure, trying to keep her thoughts clear and her resolve unshaken.

"Philip was murdered——" she began, but was checked by the noisy clatter of her uncle's movements. He sprang back from her in simulated indignation.

"How dare you say such a thing?" he shouted. You must be a wicked girl to have such thoughts."

"I suppose you can murder me too," she went on. "But you cannot make me marry you. That I will never do."

"To-morrow——you shall marry me," cried Alexis, smashing his clenched fist on the table in front of the sofa.

Sandra looked from one face to the other of the three observing her, all evil and all hostile.

"I would rather die," she said.

"To-morrow she will sing a different song," said Dr. Smithson. "At any rate we have done our job, my dear Prince, and I hope there is not going to be any hitch——"

"You are as greedy as a Jew," said Alexis, getting up. "I tell you by to-night I'll have it for you. But you'll have to take it in good German paper. I can lay my hands on nothing else. It's that or nothing, my English gentleman."

"Curse him," said Dr. Smithson, when the German gentleman had strutted out of the room. "Curse him and all his tribe! I hope they'll be wiped off the earth."

"He means to cheat us," said Mrs. Smithson.

CHAPTER XVIII

SANDRA had been so heavily drugged for the journey that she knew nothing of its adventures and delays through a country swiftly moving its millions for war. Her room at the boarding-house was a back one, and though the sound of the everlasting electric cars reached it she saw nothing from the windows but a dreary courtyard. Not till she got into the taxi that was to take the three of them to dine with her uncle did she get any impression of the state of affairs. Then for the first time she saw excited crowds, heard bursts of songs and cheering, was held up by marching troops and wondered whether this could be the normal condition of a great city.

"The people here seem to be very excited," she said, and shrank back into a corner of the taxi which was blocked for a time in the crowd. It was not pleasant. Faces red with passion stared at them through the closed windows, fists threatened them, and vile epithets informed them that they looked like English people.

"Is there a revolution?" said Sandra, for she had been taught about revolutions by Father Milias, and she saw that Dr. and Mrs. Smithson looked green with fright.

"There is war," said Dr. Smithson. "Germany is at war with France and Russia."

That news conveyed something to Sandra's mind, but not very much. She had heard and read of wars, but the bloodiest battle on the printed page had not touched her spirit with its fury as this

interrupted progress through a war-crazed crowd did. When they got to the restaurant Alexis had chosen they passed through its door into safety and were thankful. Terror had seized the Smithsons: terror and anger that they should be trapped here in this dangerous hour.

"We must get away to-night at any price," Sandra heard him say as they went in, and she saw that he looked all colours still and unhinged.

The restaurant was a large one and every seat seemed to be taken. At one end of it there was a raised platform with a piano. Flags were flying from the walls and the ceiling, patriotic mottoes were put up in conspicuous places, food was being rushed here and there; here, too, people were noisy and excited. When a young man in evening dress appeared on the platform and began to sing "Die Wacht am Rhein," the whole audience neglected its food, rose to its feet and sang loudly with him. When they had finished they sat down to their sausage and beer again, and Alexis came from a corner where he had reserved a table to receive them.

"I said eight o'clock," he observed sourly.

"It has taken us an hour to get through the streets," said Dr. Smithson. "We always hear a great deal about German organisation, but your police don't seem able to manage a crowd."

"They may have orders not to interfere," said Alexis.

"Then you'll have some accidents," said Dr. Smithson uneasily.

"Accidents are sometimes useful," said Alexis, and pushed the menu card towards his guests. "What will you eat?"

The spectacle of the streets, the rousing song, all the surprises and the traffic of this evening had waked Sandra from her lethargy and even put her personal fears and sorrows into the background.

She watched the Smithsons and saw that the doctor had no appetite for his food. He swallowed with difficulty and drank much more than he ate. Mrs. Smithson controlled her nerves, but hardly spoke even when their host's assaults on England became gross and personal.

"I can't think why you trouble to say these things to us," Dr. Smithson argued obsequiously. "I've often told you that we don't care a damn for our country. Why are we in Germany?"

"That is what I have often asked myself," said Alexis, raising his voice a little. "What are you doing in Germany? What are you doing, for instance, n Berlin?"

"We leave to-night," said Mrs. Smithson.

"We came to Berlin to see you," said Dr. Smithson, also raising his voice, for he perceived that people at other tables were watching them and listening. Then he lowered his voice to a whisper, but Sandra heard what he said.

"Keep your promise," he urged. "Pay us what you said you would and let us go."

Before Alexis could answer the whole restaurant seemed to Sandra to go suddenly and terrifyingly mad: as mad as the Gadarene swine who, Father Milias had taught her, rushed blindly to their own destruction driven by evil spirits. What had happened, what new panic seized people, she did not understand at first; but she saw the single sheet of an evening paper torn from one hand to the other, she heard execrations and cries of dismay, she saw men and women demented with passion, and above the hubbub she made out the reiterated name of England spit out with such venom that she felt scared by it. She saw that the Smithsons were shaking with terror and that her uncle watched them with an evil pleasure as if the frenzy of the crowd served his purpose and put them in his power. The

doctor presently put back his chair and looked at his wife. But though he spoke to her he spoke in German, so that Sandra could follow what he said.

"Come," he urged, "we can slip out now without being noticed."

She hardly noticed him and turned to Alexis.

"Have you brought what you owe us?" she said. "Are you going to keep your word or not? Say Yes or No."

"England is going to stab us in the back," he said without lowering his voice. "Do you think I will pay English people good German money?"

"We shall be torn to pieces," muttered the doctor, half rising again and then sinking back as if his knees failed him. His voice was husky with fright.

"English! English!" people began to whisper and then to cry aloud. There was no longer any possibility of slipping out unnoticed. The table became the centre of attention, the point on which the gathering fury of the crowd began to concentrate. Still the printed sheet that had caused the commotion was handed about in the room, and still there was an ebb and flow of tumult that at one moment left Vavarin's table to join in some noisy demonstration in another corner, and the next moment pressed round the English people and threatened them. The women were as mad with excitement as the men.

"No quarter," they yelled, and some of them climbed up on the tables, scattering glasses and earthenware unheeded. One waved a sword, another a flag, and all of them reminded Sandra of a cat she had once seen, mad with rage and fear, exploding like fireworks, unheeding, ineffective, pitiable in its animal abandonment.

"Kill, kill!" screamed the furies. "Death to England! Curse her! Finish her if you are men. Promise us not to leave man, woman, or child alive. Down with England!"

"Come away!" whispered the doctor.

Then, suddenly, for a moment there was a diversion. The furies ceased to scream, the men watched and waited, the hubbub fell into silence—a sinister enigmatic silence. Every one in the room saw a girl, white beneath her paint and powder being urged and dragged upon the platform by a cluster of young men who looked the worse for drink and wicked. The huge audience grew so quiet that what one of the young men said could be heard in the furthest corner of the room.

"Miss Nancy Robinson of London will now sing 'Deutschland über Alles,'" he announced in a thick voice.

Alexis laughed and spoke to Mrs. Smithson.

"Nancy Robinson—a little compatriot of yours," he related. "She has been rather popular here this summer."

"A singer!"

"A singer! A dancer! A courtesan! Anything for which we chose to pay her."

Sandra watched the girl on the platform fascinated and still afraid. For the silence that waited was not a friendly silence, and the girl who stood alone there knew it. If she had stood against a wall to be shot she could not have looked more desperate. She was quite young. Twice she began to sing and her voice failed her. No one could hear a note. That made the audience angry, and it began to move and shout to her to sing. It pressed close up to the platform and even climbed on to it, crushing closer and closer. Sandra saw her rigid face and figure against a background of men and women all bigger and heavier than she was.

"Sing! Sing!" they commanded.

Then Sandra saw and heard what to her dying day she never forgot. The girl who had looked petrified with fear lost her fear. Her eyes became

alive and she took a step forward smiling. She shook out a little flag that she must have carried hidden in her hand and quite clearly and smilingly she began to sing her own National Anthem—

"God save our Lord the King!
God save our noble King!"

Like a pack of wolves the crowd closed in on her. She did not finish the third line.

"Kill her! Kill!" screamed the women who had screamed before.

"They will tear her in pieces," said some one Sandra could hear. Every one in the room had risen now. Every one was either crushing to get away or crushing towards the platform when Alexis, without any warning, suddenly drew his sword and at the top of his raucous voice shouted: "A spy! A spy! An English spy! Don't let him get away!"

Taken completely by surprise, Dr. Smithson hardly tried to defend himself. He saw a crowd making an ugly rush towards him, he dodged, he feinted, he then turned savagely on Alexis, who thrust at him with his sword. Instead of helping him to escape people seemed to hem him in and push him forward. The voices of hell itself condemned him. The sword pierced his heart and with a gasp and a shriek for pity he fell, a huddled, lifeless thing beneath the feet of frenzied men. They trampled on him to get at Mrs. Smithson.

"English! English!" Sandra heard it like a battle cry and tried to reach the woman and help her. But Alexis had her by the arm.

"Come," he said, and with his dripping sword he forced a way for himself through the crowd. No one interfered with him. No one tried to stop him. People fell back before him as before a conqueror.

CHAPTER XIX

THEY stopped at a quiet detached house in a quiet street: a street of villas surrounded by trees and little gardens. There were no lights in the windows. Alexis paid the driver and signed to Sandra to go in at the gate.

"Whose house is this?" she said.

"Mine."

She was past remonstrance, she was almost past fear. The man who walked beside her trailed a bloody sword, and she knew herself to be wholly in his power. Perhaps he would kill her too.

"Does it hurt much?" she said; and it was the second time she had spoken since she had seen Dr. Smithson throw up his hands and fall, struggling horribly, on the floor.

"Does what hurt?" said Alexis. He had opened the door of the house with a latchkey and turned on the light in the hall.

"To be run through with a sword! Was he dead when he fell?"

Alexis rang an electric bell. Then he opened the door of a sitting-room and turned on light there.

"Go in," he said to Sandra, and she obeyed him listlessly.

"Are you hungry?"

"Hungry!"

She looked at him in dumb amazement, and before she spoke his orderly came into the room, a stupid, frightened-looking peasant boy in uniform.

"Bring food," ordered Alexis.

The boy looked as if he only half understood, but he saluted and went out of the room. Alexis stared hard at Sandra. She was standing where she had entered and looked scared out of her senses. Her eyes did not take in anything they saw, for they were fixed and wild, her colour was the colour of death, her voice when she spoke dragged dully.

"This is your father's house," he said, trying to bring her out of the horror that had seized her; but she paid no attention to him.

"What happened to the girl who sang?" she said with a shudder. "What happened to the other?"

"How should I know?" said Alexis angrily. "You saw as much as I did. Sit down and take off your hat."

"I want to go," she said. "Let me go."

"Little fool! Where would you go?"

"I would go back to the island."

"What would you do there? Your brother is dead."

"I would bury him then — at Ora — where he belongs."

"Have you forgotten what I told you?"

"I would bury him at Ora—where he belongs."

"Very well," said Alexis. "To-morrow we shall be married. The day after, when I join my regiment, you shall go to the island and then to Ora."

She made no remonstrance, as he had expected, nor did she acquiesce. She looked round the room like a trapped thing in hopeless search of an escape; then she seemed to stagger and recover herself. The light of sanity flickered in her eyes for a moment, and from a writing-table in a corner close by her she took up a frame holding a faded photograph of an old man and two young ones, all in uniform.

"Who is that?" she said pointing to the least faded of the three.

"That! Prince Sergius of Katavia," said Alexis. "Don't you know your own royal family? The old Duke gave that photograph to your father and signed it."

"That is why they called him Your Highness," murmured Sandra; but she did not look satisfied.

"What are you mumbling to yourself?" said her uncle.

"He knows about Philip," she said, turning to her uncle suddenly, and she saw as she spoke that she had hit him.

"What nonsense are you talking now?" he thundered.

"They didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"The Prince came to the island on Friday night."

"What for?"

"He knew we were there. I don't know how he knew."

"But he doesn't know you."

"He does. We had met in the forest. He came to the island on Friday night. He saw Philip and he saw the Smithsons. They knew him."

"Nonsense!"

"Their name was not Smithson at all. They were afraid and came away. Alive or dead Philip is with Prince Sergius now. He did not die like a dog as you think he did."

"Enough!" cried Alexis, striking the table with his fist. "You at any rate are not with Sergius. You are here, with me. What do I care for Katavia and its Princes? We shall swallow the duchy when its hour strikes. The very heavens fight for us and the stars in their courses."

He was interrupted by his boy, who came into the room with a tray holding food and set it on the table. Alexis went to a sideboard, got out a bottle of champagne and told the boy to open it. When the boy fumbled and failed his master hit him a violent blow and drove him from the room. Then he got the cork out with a sharp explosion, the wine overflowed on the floor, and he rushed to the table to fill the glasses on the tray.

"Come here," he said to Sandra. "Our time together is short. We will drink together and then——"

She shrank from his eyes that were fixed on her, and from his heavy hand that held out the glass to her, a hand that had just killed a man in cold blood. She shrank from his sword that must be stained still.

"Let me go," she tried to say, but she was inarticulate with fear. He only heard the choking breath with which she tried and failed to speak.

"Little mule," he said savagely; "will you learn to come when I call?"

The table was between them, and as he advanced towards her the climax of all she had suffered came close, interpreting itself to her ignorance in those ravening, half-shut eyes. She shrieked for help. The boy, who must have been near, burst into the room. His master charged at him in fury. As he retreated an electric bell rang loudly through the house. Sandra heard a jumble of sounds in the hall, a chair overturned, curses, the bell again, the boy's cry of pain, footsteps that struggled here and there, a door thrown open, other voices, and the entry into the house of other persons. She ran forward herself and saw that the small hall looked full of people.

She saw Sergius.

She forgot that he was a Prince of the blood, and

she only Sandra Vavarin. She forgot everything except the overwhelming joy and relief of his presence here, and she never questioned for a moment that he had come on her account and would ensure her safety. His eyes told her more than that the moment they discovered her. They opened the gates of paradise before he spoke.

"You've come!" she said under her breath.

"Did you think that I should not come?" said he. "But it has taken time to find you. How long have you been here?"

"I don't know. A few minutes," stammered the girl, and Sergius saw that she was shattered and terrorised, sick and faded, the melancholy wreck of the girl he had met in the forest.

"Will she stand a journey?" whispered Lady Looper who had come with him.

"To what do I owe the honour of a visit from Your Highness at this hour?" said Alexis.

"You owe it to your niece, Princess Alexandra Vavarin," said the Prince. "She will return with me at once to Katavia."

"That, I fear, is out of question," returned Alexis, "since she is to marry me to-morrow."

"Don't worry!" whispered Lady Looper, for she had her arm round the girl now and felt that she was quivering with terror. "He's up against us. That quiet man with the Prince is Hagen, the chief of police."

"He has just committed a murder," whispered Sandra.

"WHAT!" said Lady Looper. She thought the girl was raving, but her exclamation reached the three men who stood a little apart. The orderly had disappeared.

"He has just committed a murder," said Sandra. Her eyes were heavy and her voice dull and tired, but

she spoke with vengeful conviction. "His sword is red with blood. Look at it!"

She shuddered a little and softly fell from Lady Looper's arms upon the floor. The Prince rushed to her help. There was a sudden stir and then a death-like pause. Alexis had drawn his sword again and made a movement that Hagen checked like lightning. The two men stood so till the Prince turned again, Alexis with his drawn sword and Hagen covering him with a revolver.

"Your Highness sees that the blade is still red," said Hagen quietly. "The stains are fresh ones."

"I have killed an English spy to-night," said Alexis, sheathing his sword. "You can put away your revolver, Hagen. "You will get no one in Berlin to arrest me for that, and you have no power to do it. I killed Dr. Smithson because he was a spy, and also because I was not satisfied with his treatment of my nephew."

"You have killed Dr. Smithson, whose real name was Pratt!" exclaimed Lady Looper.

"Have you any objection, Madame?" said Alexis.

"None at all," cried the lady. "I wish he had killed you too."

Alexis looked rather taken aback. Meanwhile Hagen still covered him uncomfortably with the revolver. He did this till the two ladies with Prince Sergius had left the room.

"But the Prince owes me an explanation," cried Alexis. "He breaks into my house and abducts my niece, who is also my ward."

"You'll never see her again," said Hagen, backing carefully towards the hall. "If you ever show your face in Katavia you'll get into my clutches."

"And what about my land and my other property there?"

"The island! What's it worth?"

"The island! I'm talking of the castle, the forest, the farms: the enormous fortune belonging to me, Prince Vavarin."

"You! You're not Prince Vavarin."

"Since the boy is dead!"

"He's alive."

"Hell and damnation!" said Alexis.

CHAPTER XX

Six weeks later, on a glorious September afternoon, Sandra sat with Philip on the terrace in front of the palace at Avlona. The sun shone on the rippling surface of the sea and on the pine trees sheltering them. The air was fresh and scented with a little stir in it. Malwina, who was nursing Philip, waddled across the terrace with an extra rug for him because she had seen the leaves of a sycamore flutter in what she said was a wind.

"There is no wind," said Philip lazily, but he let the old woman put the rug over his feet. He still looked emaciated, but not as he had looked on the island. The heavy shadows of suffering had left his face and his eyes had recovered their light.

"It is most important that thou shouldst avoid a chill," said Malwina. "It is better to be too warm than to shiver!"

Then she dropped a curtsey to Sergius, who came out upon the terrace, waited a moment while he looked at her charge, and would have waddled away again if he had not detained her.

"Sit here for a few minutes," he said. "I am going to show the Princess the view from the Eagles' Rock."

Sandra had risen when he appeared and dropped the little curtsey that she had learned to make here. She had not spoken while he looked at Philip, and now she followed silently down the steep, craggy track by which he led her. The air and the sky were not more shining than her mood in this happy hour; and when

he turned to help her over a difficult step, taking her hand in his to do so, she coloured so innocently and alluringly that he there and then said what he had meant to say a little later.

"Have you found out then that I love you?" he whispered: and Sandra's silence answered him.

"I've been very patient," he went on as he drew her to him. "I've loved you ever since the first time I saw you in the forest at Ora."

"But will the Duke allow it?" said Sandra.

Sergius laughed.

"The Duke is my younger brother," he said. "Besides you are a Vavarin. Our families have intermarried in former times."

"Have they? I know so little about my family. I only know one thing of importance."

"What is that?"

Sandra hesitated and then spoke.

"It is something my uncle told me, and it may not be true. He said that Philip had no right to the title and the property."

Sergius hesitated. Prince Lussin had told him the whole story of Ora, and he knew now that Philip was probably the son of Prince Carol of Gothland. But it was not a story he wanted to tell Sandra at present, or one that need ever reach Philip's ears.

"I should forget about it if I were you," he said. "Philip is Prince Vavarin, and no one will try to upset his claims now."

"Will Philip live?" asked Sandra tremulously.

She had never ventured to ask this before, but the last few days had given her hope.

"He will live," said Sergius. "We shall have to take great care of him for a year or two. He shall live with us till he is strong again."

"With us!"

Sandra echoed her lover's words and thought that all the music of the spheres rang in them. She wished

she could stay for ever there beside him, looking out to sea, finding all she wanted in his presence, and the fulfilment of her dreams in his love.

"But we must go where duty calls us," said he as they clambered up the steep track by which they came and emerged near the terrace, where a small intimate party now sat at tea. Torquil and Patricia were both there, and the Loopers, old Prince Lussin, and Philip on his couch. Prince Lussin had a letter in his hand that he put down when Sergius appeared.

"They look as if the sun was shining!" cried Lady Looper when she saw them.

"Another *mésalliance!*" said Patricia. "What will Princess Karl of Gastein say?"

The brothers shook hands with each other, Patricia kissed Sandra affectionately. No one could show surprise, because every one except Sandra had known for weeks what Prince Sergius meant to do. He had only waited to speak till he thought the girl was ready to answer. He had wooed her day by day, delicately and ardently. Even Philip only said it made him happy.

"But surely you are surprised too," urged Sandra. "Why should he want to marry me?"

"What you want is a mirror," said Lady Looper, who was not meant to hear. "Now that you're losing your look of a bag of bones that has had a fright——"

"He is dead," interrupted Philip, clasping his sister's hand nervously: for Lady Looper's remark had stirred memories that were still new enough to turn Sandra pale. "He is dead. Prince Lussin's son saw him die."

"It's true," said Lady Looper in a low voice. "The old man's son was with the Russians at Suwalki, and he shot your uncle himself. He was at some devil's work——"

"There is no doubt of it," said Torquil, perhaps

seeing doubt in the children's faces. "Major Lussin had seen your uncle at Rudno. Besides, there were papers on him that he sends. One was from Dr. Smithson."

The children looked at each other.

"Dunning him for a thousand pounds," said Lady Looper.

"Now you must get well," said Sergius, coming up to Philip. "You are the only Vavarin left to carry on the family name: and here comes Malwina to take you to bed."

"It grows cold," said Malwina with a curtsey to all the great people. "The days draw in already."

"Prince Alexis is dead," said Patricia to the old woman, thinking she should learn the news.

"Heaven be praised!" said Malwina. "Then the children shall have peace."

"And Sandra is going to marry Prince Sergius," said Philip, giving her the other great news.

"That I cannot believe," said Malwina, looking from one to the other in amazement.

"It is nevertheless true," said Sergius himself.

"But Sandra——" cried the old woman, for Sandra had impulsively flung her arms round Malwina's neck and was kissing her warmly.

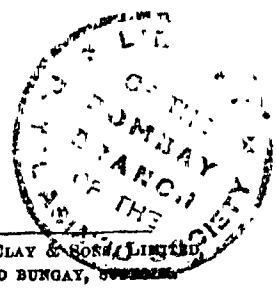
"You shall live with me in Rudno," said the girl.

"No," said Philip, "she shall live with me at Ora."

"Praise be to God!" said Malwina.

"Dr. Sergius," said Lady Looper, "I'm going to dance at your wedding!"

THE END



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